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MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

THE GRIM FACE OF MURDER

The New MIKE SHAYNE Short Novel

by BRETT HALLIDAY

HOUSE OF THE SERPENTS

A New Short Novel

by ROY MEADOR



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MIKE SHAYNE

AUGUST, 1978 MYSTERY MAGAZINE
VOL. 42, NO. 8

NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

THE GRIM FACE OF MURDER

by BRETT HALLIDAY

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The Grim Face Of Murder

by BRETT HALLIDAY

The redhead is hired to discover who is trying to drive Eve Williams crazy — and uncovers a lethal conspiracy beneath.

WHEN EVE WILLIAMS got out of the sapphire-blue Mercedes she had just managed to squeeze into a parking space directly in front of the boutique. Mike Shayne was moving slowly past in his Buick, looking for a place to park a few notches further along the street.

His gaze fixed on the rear-view mirror, he saw Eve Williams slip through the door on the driver's side of her blue car, a trimly feminine figure clad smartly in canary yellow pants suit that enhanced the deep tan of her skin and her flowing dark brown hair.

Suddenly, he saw her stiffen, heard a screech of brakes as the black van behind him halted to avoid hitting her. Out of the passenger's side of the abruptly halted vehicle, Shayne caught a brief glimpse of a head and face thrust toward her through the window.

It was a brief flickering glimpse of a nut-brown face, unmistakably Asian in feature, crowned by a yellow beret that matched Eve Williams' canary costume. He saw her hand lift to her mouth as she stood rigid with fear. Then, peeling rubber, the van moved around the detective's Buick and spurted past him. The face of the Asian with the beret was contorted in a toothy grin.

Until that instant, Shayne had considered the two-day-old assignment to be a cross between a wild-goose chase and a milk run. He had intended this to be his last day on the job of trailing Evelyn Gordon Williams to determine if she was or was not a victim of her own fantasies. But the hideous grinning toothy face beneath the absurd yellow beret told him two things.

Eve Williams was not insane — and this meant that someone was

going to great lengths either to convince her she was or to drive her over the edge.

Shayne picked up speed and took on the chase. The big Buick wove in and out of the medium-heavy traffic as he maneuvered into a spot three intervening cars behind the van, a black-painted Dodge without lettering or other adornment.

Whoever sat behind the wheel of the dark vehicle was a skillful driver. He took a quick left turn up ahead, just in front of an oncoming truck, leaving the detective stalled in frustration as he was stopped by a red light before he could follow. Unable to pursue, he made the round of the block and was lucky enough to find the spot still open ahead of Eve Williams' Mercedes.

It seemed unlikely that she would be leaving the boutique so soon, but Mike Shayne kept an eye on the rear-view mirror as he unhooked the radio telephone from under his dashboard and dialed Luke Daniels' office number.

"Dr. Daniels — Mike Shayne calling," he told the receptionist.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Shayne, but Dr. Daniels is on another line. Will you hold?"

"It's about Eve Williams," the redhead told her.

"It's she who's on the other line," said the girl.

"I'll hold then. But let him know I'm waiting."

"Certainly, Mr. Shayne . . ."

Moments later, the psychiatrist's deep mellow voice said, "Mike? What's going on?"

"That Jap in the yellow beret just scared the hell out of your patient, Luke. She's not seeing things, unless both of us are suffering from the same loose screw."

"Thank God! She's half out of her mind with fear. Did you get a make on him?"

"No, dammit! He got away. But he's for real. Tell her I'm coming inside the shop she's phoning from so she won't be scared of me."

"Do you think that's wise, Mike?"

"From what you've told me, she needs reassurance. I want her to know I'm on the job and will see she gets home in one piece. There's no point in maintaining my cover with her now."

"I suppose — no, it's okay. I'll tell her."

"Also, I want to question her. Not as a shrink but as an investigator. Maybe I can get something out of her from my approach."

"Don't you think I should be present, Mike? You could bring her here. I can rearrange my schedule."

"No, Luke. I want to come in from another direction. I'm not going to scare her any more than she's been scared. Quite the reverse."

"Okay, okay. We'll do it your way. But for Pete's sake, no rough stuff, no intimidation."

Shayne hung up the phone, locked the Buick and got out, put a quarter in the parking meter, then did the same for the Mercedes, which was waiting with the red ball up.

In the intensely feminine environment of the boutique, a filigreed treasure house of fragile fripperies bathed in some scent the redhead's nostrils failed to identify, Mike Shayne felt very much the bull in the China shop. A dimpled blonde in a silver lame jump suit nodded toward a rear office door when he asked for Mrs. Eve Williams, then frowned.

"Mrs. Williams is on the phone," the girl said.

"Tell her Mike Shayne is here."

"Oh . . . ?" Blue eyes widened in recognition. "Is she expecting you?"

"I believe so."

The subject emerged then, a tall willowy grey-eyed brunette wearing an expression of wariness until her gaze met the detective's. He produced his wallet to show her his I.D., but she gestured it away.

"Dr. Daniels told me," she said. Then, listing her eyes to meet his almost matching grey ones, she added, "I wish I'd known sooner you were trying to help me."

"I want to have a talk with

you," he told her. And, dropping his voice, "Don't worry — I saw the little bastard, too."

He walked her to a cool, quiet, dark-paneled restaurant saloon in the next block, a place of comfortable leather-cushioned booths, all but empty in mid-afternoon, ordered Eve Williams a Ballantine's and soda to match his own double Martell on the rocks.

When the waitress left to fill the order, Shayne looked at her, saw tears running down her sun tanned cheeks. She essayed a smile, failed to make it, said, "Believe me, these are tears of relief, Mr. Shayne. What's been happening to me these past three weeks has been driving me out of my mind."

"That," he said dryly, "is what I believe it was supposed to do. We know the yellow beret is for real. So who wants to drive you out of your mind?"

She bit a thin, sensuous lower lip, mopped up the tears with a fine small handerchief, said in her low-pitched contralto, "I haven't the faintest idea. There's nobody — nothing. But there has to be, doesn't there?" Then, uttering a four-letter word in a single well-bred accent, she added, "This is almost worse than . . ." She let it hang.

"Not really." He shook his red head. "Now we know it's for real. And if it's for real, we can look for real answers."

"I know." She frowned, then took a deep breath. They were silent while the girl brought their drinks and departed. "You're right, of course. But in a way, I was hoping I was going crazy."

"But you're not. Suppose you run through the whole gruesome bit for me from the beginning. Try not to leave anything out."

Another deep breath that caused interesting movement in the white silk knit blouse beneath the jacket of the yellow suit. Then, "Okay, here goes . . ."

Eve Gordon was thirty-three, of third generation Miami wealth. Her grandfather had come to Florida during the real estate boom of the Twenties. Unlike others, he had sold out at peak prices just ahead of the great hurricane that knocked out the bottom of the boom. He had sat on his profits until the early Thirties, then bought back in again at Depression-low prices and developed his vastly enlarged holding before and during the World-War-Two boom.

"He had intuition that never failed him until he took up water skiing in his seventies and broke his neck." She shrugged, added, "He never had much to say to us kids, but he was great at Christmas and birthdays."

His son, Eve's father, had attended the Wharton School of Business and Finance in Philadelphia, had used his knowledge to increase the family fortunes many times over during the long post-

war boom, had died while still in his middle years, of lung cancer.

but he knew figures — female as well as on an audit sheet. He was never home much."

Her mother had brought up the children, Eve and her younger brother, Jim, "with a lot of help from governesses and private boarding schools." Jim, from Eve's carefully candid remarks, was an attractive loser who preferred gambling to work. As for Eve . . .

"I'm nothing special. Just a woman with a husband I adore and no children — Kirk can't have them — who tries to be useful and goes to an occasional board meeting. That's why I can't understand why anybody should have anything like this against me."

"You're in somebody's way, that's for sure," Shayne told her. "And we've got to find out who and why. How did this miserable business start?"

"I suppose it began with the undercover cop."

"Undercover cop?" the detective asked. "Who, where, when and why?"

"Oh, he had I.D. He was waiting outside the garage one Thursday night, late, when I drove home alone from a party with friends at Coral Gables. He said his name was Oliver Andrews and he was a Narc — narcotics. Wanted to know if I had anything concealed in my car."

"He was alone?"

She nodded. "He was — damned unpleasant. A real macho son of a bitch. He poked around the car — the spare tire, inside the seat cushions, the whole bit. Then he told me I was lucky that time but he'd be watching."

"Have you even been involved in narcotics?" the detective asked.

Eve hesitated, shrugged, then said, "What the hell! No more than the rest of my friends. Pot, sure — now and then cocaine at parties. But addicted I'm not. And I've never pushed the stuff. Why should I?"

Mike Shayne believed her. "You've seen him since?"

She nodded. "He hasn't accosted me, but he follows me around a lot. It gets to me. I feel like a mouse with a cat ready to pounce."

"Did you check him out with the Miami P.D.?"

She nodded. He told me it wouldn't do me any good, and it didn't. The man I talked to on the phone never heard of him — or said he hadn't. It bugged me, plenty. And then there were the phone calls. Nothing bad, just 'Watch your step, Eve, or you'll be sorry.' And then, a couple of days later, the Jap in the yellow beret. He keeps turning up and scaring me and nobody else seems to see him."

"I saw him" said the redhead. "Today."

"Praise Allah for that." She seemed close to tears again. And Eve Williams had impressed Shayne as a woman who did not cry easily.

"So you went to Dr. Daniels," said Shayne. "Was that your own idea?"

"Yes . . . no, not entirely. As a matter of fact, it was Jim — that's my brother — who suggested it. He said I was acting awfully jumpy."

"What about your husband?"

"Rick? He was worried, so he went along with it. Dr. Daniels put me on some medication, but that made me feel worse instead of better. I didn't know whether I was going crazy or not. But then the doctor put *you* on my tail, praise Allah, so I know I'm *not* going insane. Thanks, Mr. Shayne. Whatever your bill is, I'll pay it — gladly. I want to find out what's going on — and why. You *will* help . . . ?"

"I'll get on it," he told her. "Keep your nose clean and remember you're not crazy and don't expect miracles."

"You'll keep in touch?"

"I'll keep in touch. And don't hesitate to call me if anything else happens." He handed her a card, pulled out a ballpoint, wrote his home address and telephone number on the back of it.

Then he walked her back to her car and followed her to the Bal Harbor Condominium where she lived. Nobody tried to stop

her. Nobody followed them . . .

II

SEATED BEHIND a teakwood desk, Dr. Luke Daniels heard Mike Shayne out without offering information. Save for the fact that he wore a well-cut leisure suit instead of denims, he could have passed for a youngish member of the post-Mod generation. His light brown hair was carefully styled, his sunbronzed face relaxed. Only his brown eyes, alert beneath half-closed lids, hinted at the inner concentration with which he listened.

Daniels, whose degree in psychiatry was backed by a Harvard Medical School degree, was one of the few shrinks the redhead detective both respected and liked.

When Shayne finished his verbal report, Dr. Daniels said, "Very good, Mike. How do you read it?"

"Somebody is taking a heavy shot at trying to drive Eve Williams nuts — or trying to make her believe she is. And I intend to find out who and why."

Daniels nodded slowly, said, "Where and how are you going to begin?"

"That," said the redhead, "is my business." He glanced at the psychiatrist's desk phone, said, "May I?"

"Be my guest."

Mike Shayne dialed Police

Headquarters, said, "Dave Johnson, Narcotics." And, when sergeant Johnson came on, "Mike Shayne, Dave."

"Good to hear from you, Shayne. You don't often work our side of the street. Who do you want busted?"

Shayne tugged at his left earlobe, replied, "Nothing so drastic. I was just wondering if you've got a character named Oliver Andrews on your payroll."

"Oliver Andrews? Jesus, some broad called to ask me the same question last week. Naw — we've got nobody here by that name."

"Okay, thanks, Dave. Be seeing you."

"Hold it, Shayne — is somebody throwing some weight around? If there is, we'd sure like to know who he is."

"Could be."

"If there is, and you make him, for Christ's sake let us know. The Captain don't go for that one little bit. Says the department has a bad enough name in some quarters without some wise guy making it worse."

"Will do, Dave. You can bet on it."

The redhead replaced the phone in its cradle, said to Daniels, "Luke, whoever is trying to set Eve Williams up has to be laying out heavy bread. Nobody impersonates a Narc for kicks. The fall is too steep if they get caught."

"You're buying Eve's story all the way?"

"Why not? Remember, I *saw* that yellow beret."

Dr. Daniels nodded with a thoughtful frown, leaned back in his chair, said, "I'll go along with that. Confidentially, since you're working for her now, on the strength of what you've seen, I'm giving Eve a clear bill of mental health. Sure she was nervous, Mike, but who wouldn't be under the circumstances."

The detective smiled crookedly, said, "Admit it — you knew she was sane all along, or you would not have called me in."

Dr. Daniels nodded again, then shook his head. "But it just doesn't make sense," he murmured.

"It does to somebody." Shayne stood up. "You'll be getting my bill through the mail, Luke. From now on, Eve Williams is my client."

"I hope to hell you can clear it up, Mike. Since it's for real, it rings ugly. And I like Eve. Get her out of this."

"I sure as hell intend to try." The redhead walked to the door, then turned. "Luke, if she dropped anything that might be a lead under the new conditions, for Pete's sake, let me know."

"You can bet on it." Dr. Daniels rose to see Shayne out. "I'll be going over the tapes of our consultations with the proverbial fine-toothed comb."

Mike Shayne took the elevator down to the basement parking

lot of the building, reclaimed his Buick and drove through the late-afternoon traffic to his office on Flagler Street. There, Lucy Hamilton, his svelte, brown-haired long-time somewhat-more-than secretary, was in the process of closing down for the day.

He tossed his hat accurately onto a hook of the corner tree, said, "Angel, if you're not in a rush, will you try to get me Tim?"

"He's been calling you all afternoon," she told him. "Something about a date for this evening. How'd it go?"

"We got us a new client," he told her as she dialed the Miami *Daily News* City room and got Tim Rouke's extension. "Eve Williams."

"Since when we have dealt with dingalings?" Lucy asked.

"Eve Williams is no dingaling, Angel. Her hallucinations are very much for real." He took the phone Lucy offered him, said, "What's on your mind, Tim?"

"You are, you redhead illegitimate," the reporter replied. "This is the night we watch the greyhounds run. Remember? I got passes from Jack Daly in Sports."

"Give them to somebody who can use them," Shayne told him. And, when his old reporter friend howled like a wounded banshee, the redhead added, "Meet me at The Beef House as soon as you dig up what you've got on a lady named Evelyn

Gordon Williams — *Mrs. And the Gordon family.* Try both Society and Business — emphasis on real estate."

"Filthy bastard" was the mild expletive Tim Rourke used before reluctantly agreeing with, "There'd better be a story in this, Mike."

"See you in a couple of hours, Tim." Shayne hung up.

"Coming, Michael?" Lucy had collected her gear for the street and was standing by the door.

"You go ahead, Angel," he told her. "I have a call to make."

Alone, the redhead went to his inner office and poured himself a drink from the half-empty bottle of cognac he kept in a drawer of his filing cabinet. He took a healthy pull from the bottle, lit a cigaret and reached for the telephone.

"Ramon?" he said to the voice that answered on the third ring. "Mike Shayne here."

"Hello, Mr. Shayne." The voice managed to give his very Irish name a Spanish flavor. "I am honored. What can I do for you?"

"Ever hear of a character named Oliver Andrews?"

There was a moment of silence, then, "Can you get over here? I'm stuck here, waiting for a call from Eloise. She's baby sitting a millionarie's bambino."

The redhead hesitated, then said, "Okay, see you in fifteen minutes."

"I'll be here." Ramon hung up.

Ramon and, Eloise Rodriguez ran a small agency out of an office in the burgeoning Cuban sector of the city. Mostly skip-tracer work and bodyguard duty — babysitting as Ramon called it. Shayne liked them both, had been glad to send them occasional clients he had not the time or inclination to take on himself.

He frowned as he put away the bottle of Martell, retrieved his hat and locked the office door on the way out. Ramon's refusal to talk of Oliver Andrews over the telephone troubled him. Was he afraid his own office was tapped? The redhead was certain his own phone was not bugged — or was he?

The thought seemed preposterous, but it nagged him as he drove through the heavy traffic and found a parking space reasonably close to his destination.

Ramon Rodriguez rose from behind one of the two desks in the modest one-room office as Mike Shayne entered. He was almost as tall as the redheaded detective, a whip-lean Cuban with medium-length black hair and drooping mustache. His smile revealed twin rows of fine white teeth but the palm of the hand he extended felt sweaty.

"It's been too long," he told his visitor. "Sit down, Mr. Shayne." He closed the office door, returned to his revolving chair behind the desk. "Sorry I have nothing to offer you, but you

know how Eloise is about booze in the office."

"I remember." The redhead smiled faintly. Then, "Oliver Andrews?"

"You remember a real bad apple named Eddie Wingate?"

Shayne's right eyebrow rose a notch. "I helped him out of Miami two years ago. You should remember that. He's Oliver Andrews?"

Ramon nodded. "You saved our hides then. Well, just a couple of days ago, Eloise ran into him on the street. He tried to duck out of sight behind a black van parked by the curb, but saw that she recognized him.

"That evening, he called us at home. I answered. He told me his name was Oliver Andrews and that if either of us breathed a word to the police about his being back in town, Eloise would suffer."

Shayne frowned, ran a thumb-nail along the line of his jaw, said, "How come you're telling *me* this?"

"I wanted to call you right then about it, but I was afraid for Eloise. I told her the call was from somebody else." A pause, then with a look of entreaty knotting his forehead, "Mr. Shayne, I told you because you're the only one who can help us."

"Eloise still doesn't know?"

Ramon shook his head, said, "I've been going out of my mind over it."

The redhead said grimly, "Trying to drive people out of their minds seems to be Eddie Wingates new kick. So far, unless you're really ready for the laughing academy, he hasn't succeeded. Any idea where he's holed up?"

Rodriguez shook his head again, said, "Not a whisper — yet. I've asked a few contacts I can trust to keep an eye open for him, but so far" — he shrugged — "nada."

"Okay, Ramon." Shayne rose to his feet. "Keep it cool. I'll see what I can do." His face was like granite as he added, "Try not to worry and don't do anything foolish. If you *do* hear anything, get in touch with Lucy or me. Having Eddy Wingate back is going to be a problem."

Returning to his Buick, one question occupied the detective's mind — if Eddie Wingate had returned to his former camping ground, who was paying enough to make it worth while?

Eddie Wingate — Oliver Andrews, fake Narc putting the whammy on Eve Williams. It figured — it fit the pattern. He was tall, hulking, tough — had been almost a match for Mike Shayne in their one earlier knockdown-and-dragout encounter. Almost — but not quite.

Divorce frame-ups, murder set up, always with the accent on blackmail — Wingate had been a

star performer in every sleazy illicit angle of the private-eye business. Always, somehow, thanks to his connections with important clients who didn't dare cross him for fear of exposure of their own sins or worse, on the right side of the law.

In bringing Wingate down, Mike Shayne had had to cut a few shady corners himself, cuts Chief of Police Will Gentry had been willing to overlook as long as they got Eddie Wingate out of town.

Now Wingate was back. If he was the chief agent in the attempt to prove Eve Williams mentally incompetent, then he and the redhead were once more on a collision course. Shayne wondered if Wingate were aware of this.

The fact that the ploy outside the boutique earlier that afternoon had occurred while the redhead was on the job suggested a negative. But somebody had been driving the van out of which the grinning Nipponese with the yellow beret popped his head — somebody who must have been aware of being pursued to have taken that adroit left turn in traffic.

Had it been Eddie Wingate-Oliver Andrews? And who in hell was the Jap? In the past, Wingate had usually worked alone.

Shayne had some time to kill before his date with Tim Rourke at The Beef House, so he drove slowly toward the rendezvous, trying to fit together the few

pieces of the puzzle in his possession. He was about halfway there when he became aware of the grey Mercedes sedan that lagged four cars to his rear in the waning traffic of early evening.

Shayne took a sudden turn to the right, rounded a short block in an effort to get on his pursuer's tail. But it didn't work. When he got back to Flagler, on which he had originally been driving, the grey Mercedes had vanished. He thought, *What the hell?* It might have been nerves. After all, there had to be thousands of grey Mercedes in Miami.

He continued to drive toward his destination, when he noticed a grey sedan pull out of a parking place behind him in his rear-view mirror. *Son of a bitch!* he thought. If he was being tailed, it meant they were onto his being involved.

Suddenly, he noted that the Mercedes, taking advantage of a break in traffic lanes, had pulled into the center lane and was rapidly coming up alongside him. Long trained instinct cause him to lean over to pull the reserve Colt .45 locked in the special compartment of his dashboard.

The movement saved his life as a bullet from a silenced weapon whined angrily through the place where his head had been moments before. Shayne got his gun in hand and safety off just as the Mercedes pulled past him. He had to brake quickly to avoid rear-ending a pickup truck directly in his path.

As he did so, he caught a flash of a face peering back at him from the passenger side of the grey sedan.

Although it was crowned by no yellow beret, it was definitely Japanese in contour and feature . . .

III

SINCE MIKE SHAYNE was early for his date with Tim Rourke, he settled in their regular rear booth and ordered a double Martell on the rocks from Peggy, the golden haired waitress — also a plug-in telephone. When they arrived together, after taking a healthy pull on his drink, the detective called Ramon Rodriguez to tell him what had happened.

It was all too evident Eddie Wingate and Company not only knew the redhead was on the case but had to be aware that Ramon had talked to him. He was concerned about Eloise and wanted to warn the young couple they could be in danger.

But he got no answer either at the little office or at the Rodriguez apartment.

Worried, he next put in a call to Chief of Police Will Gentry's private line. This time, he connected. After a half dozen rings, Shayne's old friend came on, growling, "Dammit, Mike, this had better be important. You got me out of the tub."

When the redhead told him

what he knew, the chief's mood was not improved. "Jesus, Mike! I thought we were rid of Wingate for good. You say he's using the cover of Oliver Andrews and posing as a Narc?"

"Among other things. He seems to be working with a buck-toothed Japanese who sometimes sports a yellow beret. So far, they're getting about in a grey Mercedes sedan and black Dodge van. Eddie's already leaned on Eloise Rodriguez and his buddy just took a potshot at me. So act accordingly."

"I don't suppose — Chief Gentry sighed almost wistfully — "you'd tell me just how you got involved."

"You know me better than that. Will. I've barely met my client, and I have reason to believe there's no danger — yet — in that direction. But if you can get a fix on Eddie, you'd be doing both of us a favor."

"I'll pass the word to Narcotics," Gentry assured him. "Now get off the line before I catch pneumonia."

His next call was to Eve Williams' apartment — and she, too, did not answer. He put the phone down, frowning. With the case heating up so rapidly, he wanted to know where his client was. Where, he wondered, did a socially active young woman go on an evening? He had at least expected a servant to answer . . . He remembered, then, that the Will-

iamses lived in a condominium, and were childless. Probably the servants were supplied as needed by the house.

He was considering working that angle when Tim Rourke arrived, long, lanky and even more dyspeptic than usual over a missed evening at the dogtrack. He carried a brown manila envelope under one arm and laid it on the table in front of the detective.

"I had the whole poop photocopied," the reporter told him. "There's too damned much on Evelyn Gordon Williams and family to digest in one sitting. I hope to hell somebody makes money on this — meaning you." He aimed a nicotine-stained forefinger at the redhead for emphasis.

"Just think of the loot I'm saving you by not letting you go to the track," the detective replied. He signalled Peggy to bring them both drinks.

"Aw hell, Mike," said Rourke. "Aren't you even going to open the envelope?"

"In due course," Shayne replied. With the drinks, they ordered dinner.

The ace reporter for the *Daily News* went for the specialty of the evening, short ribs of beef with rissole potatoes, then, after a moment of deep thought, added, "Make it hashed browns instead of rissole, Peggy — and tell the chef to cover it with three fried eggs — firm."

Shayne almost lost his appetite — almost — at his friend's order. He sometimes wondered if the leathery newsman really liked such hideous gustatory combinations or ordered them merely to test his companion's stomach.

Taking a deep breath, he ordered his usual two-inch-thick sirloin steak, charcoaled outside, blood rare within. For escort duty, he requested Long Branch potatoes, asparagus in butter and a side order of Irish bacon. Not until their drinks had been refilled did he open the envelope and begin to examine the sizable heap of news stories copies that sifted out of it onto the table.

His client had not been fooling about the fact that the Gordon family was big money in Miami — big money and equally rich social status. One financial clipping listed, as of a few years earlier, the number of corporations in which they had sizable holdings. It was Florida blue chip all the way. If Eve dutifully attended only annual board meetings, she must sit on more than the "few" she had mentioned.

He mentioned as much to Tim, who dug up another clipping, a lengthy one that described the Gordons' creation of a coordinated voting trust to which only family members belonged. Eve was listed among the partners, along with her brother, James Wilson Gordon, her husband, Kirk Williams, who served as executive

director of the whole conglomerate, plus a few less active members — an aunt, two uncles and a couple of cousins of varying degree.

"Williams seems to be the big gun in the setup," Rourke assured Shayne. "He took over when your client's father died and runs the whole shebang. The rumor is he's tripled the net worth since he got hold."

Mike Shayne shook his head, was about to ask another question when their food arrived and, by long-standing agreement between them, all talk ceased. Not until their platters and side dishes were empty, did the redhead take a deep breath and say, "What have you got on Williams?"

"Nothing but good," Tim replied. "A nice quiet guy who knows how to make money like a one-man mint. Ivy League background with plenty of loot himself — but not in the class with what he's made for the Gordons. Gives a lot to charity and does it without fanfare. For kicks, he's into yacht racing and tennis."

"No problems?"

"Just that apparently he can't have kids — some damn seminal deficiency the medicos haven't yet been able to compensate for. Not a breath of scandal. If there is any, he's got the loot and clout to cover it up."

"What about the rest of them?"

The reporter shrugged. "Brother Jim likes to play the horses,

roulette, any damn form of sport he can lose money on. But he can afford it."

"What about his wife?" Shayne asked.

Tim Rourke shrugged again. "A looker as you can see by her pictures — hell, the whole damn family is sickeningly attractive. Her side seems to have loot, too — ain't it awful how they keep it locked up instead of spreading it around?

"She took a high-level crack at Hollywood before marrying James. Apparently, she wasn't good enough. As you can see by her pictures here, she's not lacking in beauty. Now *there's* a blonde I could really go for."

Shayne nodded, tugged at his left earlobe. The reporter rattled the ice in his near-empty tumbler, said, "How come you're involved with them, Mike?"

"Right now," the redhead replied, "I can't tell even you. The reason — I don't know enough yet. But I *can* tell you this — there's big trouble brewing in the Gordon-Williams setup."

"A serpent in paradise?"

"Something like that." Shayne frowned, reached for the phone Peggy had brought earlier. "I'd like to talk to Eve badly — right now."

"You won't get her at home this evening," Rourke told him.

Mike Shayne froze with his hand on the phone. "How do you know that?" he asked.

"Because, when I talked to Marilee Hawkins, our Society gal, and told her I needed some poop on Eve Williams, she informed me they were attending a dinner party tonight in a private dining room of the Hotel Esplanade over on the Beach."

"This year's new hotel? Lucy wanted me to take her to the opening last month. We had invitations, but I got sidetracked on that damned dreary Templeton murder and couldn't make it."

He gathered up the clippings Tim had brought from the *Daily News* morgue and began stuffing them back into the envelope, said, "Thanks, Tim. I'll go over these more carefully later."

The reporter's eyes narrowed, adding more wrinkles to his already seamed hound-dog face. He said, "Am I wrong, or are you thinking of attending this gathering yourself?"

"You're only half right," the detective assured him. "I'm not thinking of attending the party. But I want to scout around a bit and see that my client gets safely home. You can stick around here as long as you like — the drinks are on me."

"For this" — Rourke's tone was rich with self-pity — "I gave up a night at the races?"

"You sound like an old Marx Brothers' film," said Shayne, rising. "Don't get too smashed."

"With Eve Williams as your client, don't be surprised if I get

plastered on Mumm's Cordon Rouge."

"Stick to boilermakers, Tim. The remnants of your kidneys are adjusted to them."

Despite his mock-reproach, Mike Shayne was worried when he left The Beef House — worried about a number of elements in the case. For one, he was worried about the return to Miami of Eddie Wingate, a man he knew to be exceedingly dangerous. He was worried about Ramon and Eloise Rodriguez and their whereabouts.

He was worried about the fact that his own involvement with Eve Williams and the attempt to prove her mental incompetence should so quickly have resulted in the violent attempt on his life earlier that evening. Above all, with the case heating up so quickly, he was beginning to fear for his client's safety.

There were simply too much money and power involved. He had, to this point, considered these factors protective for Eve. If whoever wanted her out of the way had gone to such lengths to prove her incompetence, it suggested whoever was behind it needed her alive.

Otherwise, quick elimination offered a much safer and simpler solution.

Driving across MacArthur Causeway to the brilliant man-made palisade of Miami Beach with its glittering towers of light, the redhead felt strangely help-

less. The next move was going to have to come from the other side. He only hoped it was not fatally successful.

Considering the possibilities, Mike Shayne checked his big Colt during a wait for a red light, then thrust it into a clip holster over his right hip. For the duration of the case, whatever its outcome, he had no intention of being again caught unarmed.

He checked into a small parking garage on a side street just off Collins Avenue, less than two blocks from the new Hotel Esplenade, walked to the splendidly lighted Venetian-palace facade of the ornate hostelry. Its foyer was created around a fair sized imitation canal complete with a single-arched bridge and a pair of small gondolas poled by resplendently-costumed gondoliers.

A visit to the manager's office informed him that the party his client was attending was in a private banquet room on the mezzanine floor overlooking the watery lobby. Abe Carter, the manager, offered him a drink, which the redhead refused. He found a comfortable chair covering the banquet hall entrance and smoked quietly, waiting for the dinner to break up, which it did some forty minutes later.

Some thirty-five guests came out, chatting and laughing softly among themselves. Evidently the evening had been a pleasant one. Shayne had no problem in

spotting the group with which his client emerged. In a dinner gown of white crepe de chine trimmed with silver, Eve Williams looked stunningly beautiful — as did her sister-in-law, clad in backless, strapless cloth of gold, a small curvaceous shimmering blonde cut to a more theatrical scale.

Her tall, blue-eyed companion he recognized from the clippings as Kirk Williams. Nor did he miss the younger man with Marie Gordon, Eve's brother, James. Both men wore conventional dinner jackets, beautifully tailored.

All as it should be. Shayne followed them unobtrusively, watched while the couples were ushered by hotel footmen into their respective cars — a maroon Jaguar sedan for the Williamses, a resplendent white and gold Stutz for the Gordons. He was quite certain no other car followed his client's.

He walked back to the parking garage and had barely adjusted the driver's seat-belt of the Buick when a voice behind him — a grimly sardonic familiar voice — said, "All right, Shayne. Just follow orders and nobody gets hurt."

The voice belonged to Eddie Wingate-Oliver Andrews, and Mike Shayne hardly needed the inside rear-view mirror to see that his old enemy was holding a gun in his right hand...

IV

FOR THE MOMENT, Mike Shayne was trapped. Eddie Wingate was too much of a pro — too well versed in the techniques of violence — to fall for any of the routine ruses of misdirection that might otherwise have gotten the redhead out of this jam quickly.

"Where to?" he asked, his voice steady.

Shayne asked the question for two reasons. One — if Wingate wanted him dead at this stage of the game, Mike Shayne would already *be* dead. Two — since this was not the case, he wanted to find out whatever he could from his old enemy as to what was really going on.

"Just drive out of here, nice and easy, and head for the causeway," Wingate told him. "Oh — and before you start the car, you might toss that cannon of yours back here. And no funny stuff."

The redhead complied. His captor's graveled tone sounded almost casual, but the detective had no desire to put it to the test. He unholstered his big Colt and dropped it over his shoulder without looking around. He could feel the adrenalin pump in his veins, could taste copper at the base of his tongue as he saw Wingate, in the mirror, scoop up the weapon from the floor of the sedan without taking either eye or aim off his target.

As he got the Buick going and

swung into the Collins Avenue traffic, he said, "How'd you know where to find me?"

"Good question, Shayne," his old enemy replied.

It was evident he was not to receive an answer. While the Buick pursued a moderate path toward Miami proper, the redhead tried to sort it out. He was certain he had not been followed to the new hotel by either a grey Mercedes or a black van. Yet Wingate had been waiting for him at the parking garage.

There could be only one answer — Wingate or his Asian assistant must have managed to plant a beeper under his hood — an electronic device that would enable a pursuer to keep well out of sight while following the car in which it was planted.

Where and when? It had to be while he and Tim Rourke conferred in The Beef House. The parking lot behind the old restaurant was unguarded. This suggested that he *had* been followed — but at a distance beyond mere observation.

It also suggested that he and Wingate were being followed now — probably by the ubiquitous Asian. At least, the redhead could spot no trace of either Wingate vehicle during their drive back to Miami itself.

"Where to?" he asked again as the west bank of Biscayne Bay drew close.

"The parking lot behind your

Flagler Street office will do," Wingate replied.

"Okay." Shayne shrugged, his mind picking up speed.

It seemed evident his old enemy had some sort of deal in mind. If he listened and agreed, it suggested the man had no wish to kill him — just then. The parking lot was usually empty when the office was closed. If the night custodian was not dozing in his basement cubicle, he would pay no heed to the sight of Shayne's familiar Buick, since the detective frequently visited his office at night.

It also suggested that, if the detective did not play ball, he would be found behind the wheel of his car in the morning, probably very dead.

"Okay, Wingate," he said as he turned off the ignition. "What's the deal?"

"In a moment," Wingate replied.

They were silent until, some three minutes later, a Mercedes pulled into the little lot, effectively blocking its one opening to the street. Shayne could not see the driver, but he felt quite certain whoever it was had buck teeth and brown skin. Whoever it was did not get out but waited, with car lights out and the motor purring gently.

"Okay, Shayne," Wingate said. "Some years ago, you caused me to leave Miami. Now I want you to take a little trip. Drive anywhere

you want — to Tampa or Tallahassee — anywhere. Take that secretary of yours along if you want companionship. But be out of town before noon tomorrow and stay away for at least two weeks.

"Just to make sure your trip is a pleasant one, I have ten bills in my pocket to sweeten the load — a lot more than you did for me."

"What's to prevent me from doubling back?" the redhead asked.

"Don't try it, Shayne." Wingate's voice turned ugly. "If you try any stunts like that, we'll know it. And you won't get a second chance."

"Why not kill me now and get it over with?"

"Because it will make too big a stink, and that's something my client doesn't dare risk. Frankly, I don't give a damn either way — *but stay out of my hair!*"

Something rustled lightly as Wingate tossed it over the back of the seat. In almost the same second, the right rear door of the Buick was opened and quickly shut and the detective heard footsteps on the tarred surface of the parking area. In the mirror, he watched Wingate's hulking shadow move to the Mercedes and enter it. The car came to life, did a quick silent U-turn and disappeared.

Mike Shayne lit a cigaret and took a half dozen deep puffs, pondering the meaning of the scene just played. He picked up from the seat beside him the sheaf

of \$100 bills his old foe had tossed his way. There were ten of them.

Of one thing the redhead was sure now — his car had been bugged. This meant he could be followed wherever he went — remotely. He considered having the beeper removed at an all-night garage, decided against it. Several possible ideas for using it against his opponents came to mind.

He decided to go home. It had been a long and trying day and there seemed little more he could accomplish at the moment. His client had to be safely tucked in for the night or he doubted Wingate and Company would have concentrated on him. In any event, a phone call would button that end down.

He slid the sheaf of \$100 bills into his wallet and got the car started. At least one thing had been accomplished. His client was assured of her own sanity.

He put the Buick in its slot in the basement parking garage of his elderly residential hotel on Second Street, took the elevator directly to his own floor. His apartment was as he had left it, reassuringly quiet and comfortable if, like the hotel itself, slightly threadbare. Outside, save for the steady rumble of midnight traffic on the new expressway in the middle distance, the night was reassuringly quiet.

He removed jacket, holster and tie, draped them over the back of a

chair. Next he removed socks and shoes, dropped them inside his bedroom, padded into the kitchen and mixed himself a long, cool Martell and ice.

It occurred to him that the bills Wingate had so graciously tossed his way might be counterfeit. If they were, it would be a typical Eddie Wingate prank. He reached for his wallet, fished it from his jacket on the chairback, examined them. They looked and felt crisp, new, authentic.

He wondered who in hell Wingate's client was, why he was squeamish about having Mike Shayne wasted. Wingate had said it was because his murder would "make too big a stink." Stink for whom?

The only way it made sense brought the redhead squarely back to the Gordon family. Someone had gone to great lengths to convince Eve Gordon Williams that she was out of her mind. Between them, Dr. Daniels and Mike Shayne had aborted the attempt.

On his own, he felt quite certain Eddie Wingate would have killed him had he been working alone or in control. Certainly, he had tried to have him wiped out that afternoon. The bullet fired by his Asian aide had come too close to be a mere attempt to scare him off — besides which, Wingate had reason to know Mike Shayne did not scare when on a case.

Had the thus-far-nameless

Nipponese acted on his own? Possible but unlikely, the redhead decided.

But when Wingate had had the detective dead to rights an hour earlier, he had not pulled the trigger. Which meant he had been ordered not to do so. Which in turn suggested the client had some other idea for eliminating Eve Williams as a roadblock to whatever lay behind the first effort to remove her.

Plan-A failed, try Plan-B, he thought, frowning into the glass he lifted to his lips. But what in hell was Plan-B? Good question again...

He reached for the telephone on his table to dial his client when the house phone *brrred* its summons. Rising, he lifted it from its perch on a small table just inside the front door. It was the night clerk on the desk in the small lobby downstairs.

"Sorry to disturb you, Mr. Shayne, but there's a Mr. Williams here. He wants to see you."

"Send him up," said the detective. He debated against putting on shoes or slippers, uttered a silent, "To hell with it!" and waited barefoot for his visitor.

Kirk Williams was still wearing his beautifully tailored dinner jacket. His handsome face looked tense beneath its tennis and yachting tan. He was shorter than Shayne's six-one, but not by much. He refused a drink, but sat

down opposite the detective, saying, "What I have to say won't take long."

When he paused to take a deep breath he briefly closed his eyes. Then he said, "I'm Kirk Williams, Shayne — Eve Williams' husband."

He reached for his breast pocket, but the redhead waved it away with, "No need for I.D., Williams. I saw you earlier this evening at the Esplanade."

A flicker of surprise as the visitor withdrew his hand, empty. He said, "I didn't spot you."

"I went there to see that your wife was okay when I couldn't reach her at home."

"How did you know we were there?" A crease of worry appeared between the straight brown eyebrows. "Oh, I suppose you detectives have ways..."

"We do indeed," Shayne assured him. "In this case, the Society editor of the *Daily News*."

"Marilee Hawkins? My wife knows her through her charity work." Williams sounded relieved.

"Mr. Williams," said Shayne, leaning forward, glass in hand, "I don't have to be a private investigator to feel quite sure you didn't drive here from Bal Harbour tonight to discuss Marilee Hawkins."

"You're right, of course. Damn — it's so difficult. First, I wish to thank you from the bottom of my heart for clearing up Eve's

problem so swiftly and efficiently. I was beginning to fear my lovely wife really *was* losing her mind."

"Thank you." The redhead waited while his visitor took another deep breath.

Then, "But now that it's over, I hope you have withdrawn from the case. I am perfectly satisfied that her troubles are at an end."

"Well, *I'm* not!" Shayne pointed at Williams with his now-empty glass. "Somebody went to one hell of a lot of trouble and expense to set up that loony-bin bit for your bride. For cracking it, I have been followed by a pair of prize hoodlums, shot at and given a cash bribe to get out of town for two weeks. I know one of these hoodlums and should have a police make on his associate by tomorrow."

"I had no idea." Kirk Williams had paled beneath his tan.

"Well, you do now. My hunch is that somebody wanted your wife off the family voting trust by having her proved incompetent. I can't come up with any other reason for going to so much trouble. I think whoever was behind it is going to try some other plan, one that will almost certainly be both direct and much more dangerous. And you want me to drop it?"

The young executive looked as bagged him. He swallowed three times before he could speak, said, "Mr. Shayne, if I may, I'd like that drink now."

"Okay," Shayne growled as he hoisted himself to his feet. "I need another, myself." He made the drinks, returned, thrust one at his visitor, who still sat, apparently half stunned, in his chair. Williams barely managed to mutter a muted thanks.

He downed a full five ounces of nearly straight cognac before he regained his voice. Then he said, "Mr. Shayne, I assure you I love my wife dearly and will do all in my power to see she does not come to harm. But I'm still asking you to call it quits. Here — for your trouble. I hope it's enough."

He handed the detective a certified check. It was for \$10,000, drawn on the Sixth Florida National Bank, an institution largely owned and controlled by the Gordon-Williams family.

"I think it's sufficient," Shayne told him.

"Then you'll quit this investigation? I know it sounds strange, coming from me, but I have my reasons — damned important reasons."

"They must be," the detective said dryly. He dropped the check on the coffee table between them, stood up. Williams did likewise and Shayne ushered him out.

The redhead went to the telephone, dialled the private number his client had given him. When she answered, sounding half asleep, he said, "Eve Williams, your husband just left. He gave me a check for ten grand to drop

the investigation. Did you know about this?"

"I don't believe it!" she gasped. "Mike — Mr. Shayne — you're not going to do it. I'm scared out of my wits."

"Don't worry," he assured her. "I'm not going to cash the check."

"Thank God!" she said. "Whatever it is, I'll double it."

His price, he thought as he hung up, was certainly rising fast...

V

MIKE SHAYNE SHOWERED himself awake early the next morning. In his robe, he brewed himself a huge mug of smoking black coffee, laced it with cognac and began going over the clips Tim Rourke had given him the evening before, beginning with Kirk Williams.

From them, he learned that Williams was born to a prosperous small-city banker in Lockport, N.Y., that he had prepped at Hotchkiss for Yale, graduated from Wharton in Philadelphia. He had launched his career as investment counsel for an established Wall Street firm, had moved to an executive post with one of the major conglomerates and, from there, had been plucked to be general manager of the Gordon interests in Miami. He had married the new boss' daughter, been rewarded with a directorship and soon after escalated to the presidency of the board.

Not even a whiff of trouble or scandal of any kind...

But the man who had offered the detective a \$10,000 bribe to halt his investigation into the Gordon-Williams family had been deeply troubled by something. It was six to one, the redhead thought, that whatever it was which had shaken him so deeply was something buried in his past that had just emerged to bite him.

If whatever it was had happened in Miami, Shayne ought to be able to dig it out himself. It had to be something serious, for Kirk Williams had not impressed the detectives as a man easily shaken. His entire record backed up that impression. Williams had been given responsible positions from early in his adult life, had fulfilled them capably.

Even though he had married into the Gordon family, no man who spooked easily was made chairman of the board of such an immense conglomerate.

How to go about it? That was the question. Had it happened in Lockport, in New York City, in Miami?

His first call that morning, was to Lucy. He said, "Angel, how would you like a paid vacation?"

"Oh, Michael, what a nice way to wake a girl up!" She sounded both sleepy and excited. Then, more cautiously, "This isn't some kind of joke, is it?"

"It's no joke, Angel. I can't explain it now over the phone, but

we're leaving town this morning. Pack your things and meet me at Toby's Coffee Shop at — say nine o'clock."

"But the office..." she protested. "There are a lot of things to do — the files, for one...."

"They'll keep. See you at Toby's."

It had occurred to him that, since Eddie Wingate and Company were using sophisticated electronic equipment to bug his car, they might also have his phone tapped. He stretched, looked down at this well corded stomach with its numerous scars, shook his red head and, rising, moved toward the bathroom to shave.

Good old bod, he thought. On the whole, it had served him well. He hummed tunelessly as he applied lather to his face.

At Toby's, famed for its variety of omelets and waffles, he outlined what he had in mind. Lucy's lovely face fell when she learned that she was going to be alone.

"But I visited Aunt Lucy in Tampa only two months ago," she protested. "She'll be sick of the sight of my face."

"If she is," he told her gently, "she'll be the first one. Or you can stay by yourself, pick up some nice man in a good hotel, have a ball."

"You're joking, Michael." She looked shocked.

"I hope so, Angel."

"Besides, hotels cost money these days."

"I believe this will cover it." He handed her the \$1,000 Eddie Wingate had given him the night before.

She looked at the bills with a frown, said, "Why so *much*? I can manage on a lot less."

"You never know," he told her. "Now here's what I want you to do..."

An hour later, the redhead pulled off the highway and drove the Buick into a filling station. Lucy, who was following in her Vega, pulled in behind him. While an attendant filled both cars' tanks, Shayne removed his own well battered suitcase from the back of his car, transferred it to Lucy's, put her traveling gear in the Buick. He gave her a lingering kiss, which was warmly returned, before seeing her off.

"Have a ball, Angel," he said. "A real blast."

"I'll try." Her lower lip trembled. "But I'll be so *damn* worried about you. You *will* be careful?"

"Don't get yourself in a state, Angel. What do you think I'm doing this for?"

He watched with approval the smoothness with which she handled the big Buick, then crammed himself behind the wheel of the tiny Vega. Compact cars, he decided, were not for his large craggy frame. He almost stalled the unfamiliar vehicle twice before he got it rolling back toward

Miami. The hour was 9:55.

Mike Shayne was going under cover until he was able to come up with enough answers to discover just what sort of an operation he was up against. Thus far, all he had were conjectures. What he needed were facts.

His conjectures were that Eddie Wingate had to be working his game with minimum help. After all, he was *persona non grata* to the Miami Police Department. If his visibility grew too distinct, he would be covered like a tent.

He guessed that the Nipponeese was probably his sole human aide. He was also virtually certain that the Japanese was the electronics expert involved. Therefore, apart from the beeper in the Buick, there would be no surveillance of the larger car.

This, of course, was why he had switched vehicles. If they had a plant in Tampa — well, it was unlikely. As long as they felt sure Shayne was out of Miami, they'd be satisfied.

Dr. Daniels answered the redhead's ring at his apartment door — Shayne had called him from a booth in Toby's Coffee Shop while waiting for Lucy's arrival and set it up. The young psychiatrist said, "I hope you realize this is costing me seventy-five dollars an hour."

"At those prices, Luke, you can afford to take a little time off."

Shayne handed his suitcase to Daniels, who lugged it into a bed-

room overlooking the sun-dappled waters of Biscayne Bay fourteen stories below. He laid it on a rack at the foot of the big double guest bed, said, "Welcome to Tobacco Road, Mike."

"More like Tobacco - Boulevard." The detective's grey eyes took in the opulence of his new hideout. Then he said, "Anything on the Eve Williams tapes?"

"Damned if I know, Mike. You'll have to judge for yourself."

He led the way to a large study off the even larger living room, punched a couple of buttons on a cassette player before waving the redhead to a tan leather armchair, seated himself behind the large leather-topped desk, added, "I've spotted a couple of odd responses. I'll play them for you now. You can run the whole thing if you want after I leave for the office."

The doctor's pleasant voice emerged from the cassette moments later, saying, "You say you're having a problem with your husband, Eve?"

"It's not a problem exactly," Shayne's client replied. "It's just that he's acted — well different — the last few days."

"Different — in what way, Eve?"

"Well, Luke, he seems distant — edgy. He hasn't been to bed with me for two days, and that's not usual, either. The last time we did make love, he had — well, problems. We've never had

them before. And he's snapped at me over nothing several times — and that's even less usual."

Dr. Daniels halted the tape, punched another button to run it ahead. While they waited, he told Shayne, "I thought at the time that it was her odd behavior that was turning him off. Now I'm not so sure."

"It figures." The redhead nodded. "Kirk Williams is under pressure on his own. What's the other spot?"

Eve's voice came on again with, "Then there's Jim, my brother. He's been different, too."

"Different?" Dr. Daniels' voice again.

"Oh, I know Jim's a wildball but we've always had a great relationship till lately. He doesn't like the way I vote at the board meetings, but that hasn't mattered enough to count. And Marie, my sister-in-law, is a bit of a swinger. But then, so is Jim, so they get along just fine."

"No, what troubles me is the way, lately, he seems to be always about to tell me something and then buttons up. It's hard to describe. I feel as if there's something going on around me that nobody wants to tell me. Luke, does that mean I'm going paranoid?"

Once again, Luke Daniels halted the tape. "Frankly," he told the detective, "at the time I was not at all sure of Eve's mental stability. I didn't tell her so, but it occurred

to me that she might be bonkers. But since you saw the Japanese..." He let it hang.

"Thanks, Luke. You've just verified something I already suspected. I hope you don't mind if I use your phone while I'm here. You can bill me for the calls. They could run into real loot."

"Any way you want to play it. Now, I've got to get to the office and placate a couple of neurotic women for keeping them waiting. Anything you want that isn't here, have it delivered in my name. Have a nice day."

When Daniels had left, Mike Shayne prowled the apartment, found it stocked with everything from thick prime steaks in the freezer to shaving cream. There was even a quartet of full quarts of Martell in the front rank of the well-stocked liquor cabinet, plus another subsequently discovered on the back-bar that filled one end wall of the large living room.

Shayne poured himself a comfortable drink, then sank into a long sofa and reached for the digital phone on a glass-topped end table at his elbow. Lighting a cigaret, it occurred to him that, if he ever had to hide out again, he would try to do so in such opulent surroundings.

His first call was to Will Gentry, received the usual growled reply. "Where in hell have *you* been, Mike. I've had a call in for you since nine o'clock."

"Sorry, Will, I've been busy.

What gives?"

"We're been running a check on your old pal Wingate — you know how fast we can get answers in this computerized age. Wanted to know how he's been filling his time since he last departed from our midst."

"Anything hot?"

"Plenty," the chief of police replied. "But how any of it applies to his return to our fair city is up to you to figure out. We have no valid connection up to now."

"Where in hell has he been, Will?"

"All over, Mike. He spent a lot of the time in L.A., mostly milking the Hollywood people. They have an open warrant for him — two charges of assault, three of attempted blackmail. He got out of town by the skin of his teeth."

"How about the Jap?" the redhead inquired.

"He picked him up out there. Worked the technical side of one of the local TV stations. Supposed to be an electronics wizard, so watch your step, Mike."

"You're telling me? Any idea where they're holed up?"

"Not yet," Gentry replied. "And *that's* bugging us, too. Wingate's too well known here to remain invisible for long."

"Don't underrate him, Will."

"I don't. We've got flyers out all over."

"What about the Rodriguezes?" Shayne asked his old friend.

"No trace of them yet, either," Chief Gentry replied. "Jesus, Mike, I was beginning to worry about *you* till you called just now."

"Don't — worry, I mean. I'll let you know when to start."

"I'm not joking, Mike."

"Neither am I."

His next call was to his client. Somebody — it sounded like a maid — replied that Mrs. Williams was out, and would he please leave a message.

The detective hesitated briefly, then said. "Tell her I'll call back. Do you know when Mrs. Williams will return?"

"This afternoon — late I expect."

"Okay — thanks," he replied and hung up.

VI

MIKE SHAYNE FINISHED his drink, then picked up the phone and dialed a Los Angeles number. It was just after noon in Miami, which meant three hours earlier on the West Coast. Early — but the earlier he connected, the better. Luckily, Dennis Reardon was already in his office, he was a partner in one of the best private agencies in Southern California, and a long-time friend of the Miami redhead.

"What can I do for you, Mike?" he asked. "I owe you a couple."

"You may have to dig," Shayne told him. "It's probably around

two years old. I want what you can get on a blonde ex-starlet named Marie Hale, who snagged herself a rich playboy and moved here."

"Marie Hale?" There was hesitation, then, "The name rings a faint gong. Seems to me she got some play around then — Universal or Republic, I'm not sure. What's with her?"

"See if you can wire her to a character named Eddie Wingate. He may have been Oliver Andrews in your bailiwick."

Reardon whistled. "Oliver Andrews I remember all right. A real punko bastard. Into everything slimy."

"I know. What was his main pitch out there?"

"Blackmail setups." Another pause, then, "Marie Hale? She could of been one of the broads he used. Want me to look into it?"

"If you will, Dennis. Get back to me as soon as you can." He gave Reardon Dr. Daniel's home number, added, "This is red-ball rush."

"Will do. Watch yourself, Mike."

His next call was to Major Jack Radford, the colorful character who ran The Gables, Miami Beach's most opulent and exclusive gambling club. It was a technically illegal enterprise winked at by the authorities as long as it was operated without Syndicate infiltration, a condition Major Radford had managed to maintain for many years.

He got through to the major immediately. Radford was eating a midday breakfast in his rooms atop the casino he ran. His greeting was warm and redolent with Georgia hospitality from the major's home state. "Come on over and join us, Shayne," he said. "I haven't seen nearly enough of you lately."

"I only wish I could, Major," the redhead replied. "But just between you and me, I'm under cover for a bit."

"Trouble with the law, Shayne?" The gambler chuckled. "I have a little pull in some quarters. If I can help you..."

"Thanks, Major. It's not that at all. I'm looking for some information on Jim Gordon. You know him?"

"I do indeed, Shayne. I only wish there were more like him around. Young Gordon is practically a charter member of the club. Now we both know I'm not exactly a poor man, but I wish I had half of what he's dropped here at the Gables."

"You've probably got all of it," Shayne replied.

"I only wish I did." Radford sounded positively lugubrious. He sighed, said, "If you had any idea of my overhead, you'd never have said that."

"I'm beginning to wish I hadn't, Major. So Gordon's a big loser."

"A positive sucker, Shayne. But, praise Allah, he can afford

it — or his family can. I was afraid, when he married that pretty little chick of his, he'd be lost to us. It often happens that way. But, if anything, he's plunging more since than before. That bride of his is a born gambler, too — but she's too sharp for the old Major here, believe me."

"I'll believe that when the stars go out, Major. Has he had any big recent losses you know of."

"No bigger than usual, but that's right big, believe me, Shayne — Rockefeller-Rothschild big. Sometimes I wonder how he can afford it, even with all the Gordon millions behind him."

"Do you expect him in tonight?" the detective asked. It was about time, he thought, that he got a look at his client's brother in action. But Radford replied in the negative.

"He was coming in — had a table reserved for dinner. But his wife just called in to cancel it. Said the whole family was going to spend a couple of days at that big place they bought beyond Coral Gables."

Mike Shayne frowned again as he hung up, ran a thumbnail along the line of his jaw. It was the first he had heard of a house party scheduled for the evening ahead. Evidently, this was something new, or the Gordons would not have had to cancel a reservation. It had to be important enough to pull Jim Gordon away from his favorite diversion.

More important, Eve Gordon Williams would probably be there. This, the detective did not like.

He began to sense a pattern forming against his client. The detective had effectively frustrated the attempt to prove Eve mentally incompetent only the day before. Then had come the attempt on his life, followed by the thinly veiled threat to get out of town.

Plan-A was aborted. The house party had to be Plan-B. He could feel the back of his neck prickle at the thought of his client in danger. He recalled the evening before, when he had watched the two couples leave the private banquet room of the new Hotel Esplanade. All had looked congenial as far as the families were concerned.

But Marie Hale Gordon was probably linked with Eddie Wingate from the West Coast. Jim Gordon could be in the hole even more deeply than his apparently unlimited income could bear. As for Kirk Williams — he had shown himself to be terrified of some thus-far-undisclosed problem out of his own past.

Eve would be alone with no one in her own family she could trust, probably unaware of her potential danger. He dialed her private number again, but there was no answer.

He called Tim Rourke at the *Daily News*, to learn the location of the mansion in which the house

party was to be held. Tim referred him to the Real Estate editor, who had some information.

It was the Taylor-Barton estate, well outside the city limits, a thirty-room house with a dozen acres of landscaping, sitting on a low knoll that offered fine drainage during the rainy season.

Shayne didn't give a damn about the drainage. He was much more interested in the fact that the whole estate was surrounded by a link-chain fence, that there were only two gates and that both were guarded. This left him with an entry problem, since he had an idea he would not be exactly a welcome guest.

He was about to call his own answering service when the phone rang by his elbow. He uttered a wary, "Hello," hoping his cover here had not been blown, was relieved to hear Dennis Reardon's voice on the other end.

"I think I've got what you want, Mike. There *was* a tie-in with Oliver Andrews or Wingate or whatever. That was why Marie Hale got her ass canned by Columbia. Seems they set up a john who turned out to be one of the studio chiefs' nephews. A real cozy setup. They had the whole joint wired for sound and pix. A Jap electronics wizard was in on it — a real bad apple named Tachi Ozaki. That was right before Marie nailed the Gordon kid at a Las Vegas casino. Does that help?"

"It could. At least I know where they came from. Thanks, Dennis. Any time I can return it."

"That's okay, Mike. You're one of us."

Shayne poured himself another drink and began thinking of the thick prime steaks sitting in Luke Daniels' freezer. The afternoon was well along, and it was a long time since breakfast with Lucy at the Toby Coffee Shop. But before he called it a day, he dialed his office answering service.

Lucy had arrived at her aunt's in Tampa without incident. Chief Gentry's calls were on record, as well as those of a used car dealer who wanted to interest the redhead in a bullet-proof dead mobster's Bugatti he had picked up.

Shayne silently snorted at the thought of just how inconspicuous a custom built foreign car would be for a man in his profession, said, "Anything else?"

"Oh," said the answering service girl. "A man named Ramon called just a few minutes ago. Said he'd just found out Eloise was at two-twelve Acacia Place and that he was going to get her. He seemed to think you'd understand."

"Thanks." The detective put the phone back in its cradle and headed for the guest bedroom. He knew Acacia Place — it was a winding rural road on the very edge of the Everglades, with

small, widely separated bungalow-type homes. Finding 212 might be a problem, since the area had not yet been cleaned up and sign-posted by the burgeoning city's developers.

He fished the .38-caliber Remington, that was doing substitute duty for his Wingate-appropriated Colt .45, out of his suitcase, checked it out before holstering it over his right hip, then slipped an extra magazine into a jacket pocket.

After his second session with Wingate, Mike Shayne's concern over the fate of the Rodriguez couple had dwindled. Since the blackmailer knew that the redhead knew Wingate was already in town, there seemed no real reason for their concern with Ramon and Eloise. But, from Ramon's message, his wife-partner had been kidnapped as promised and was being held captive.

Mike Shayne felt at least partly responsible. And he was not a man to shirk a responsibility where the safety of his friends was concerned. He had not intended to emerge from his luxurious hide-out until after dark. But he decided the urgency of the message outweighed the risk of being spotted by anyone connected with Wingate.

After all, as far as he knew, there were only Wingate and the Jap, and they had to be spread thin. So why, he wondered again, had one or both of them grabbed

Eloise Rodriguez? How had Ramon found out? Surely they were not holding the young Cuban woman for ransom. The Rodriguezes simply did not have that kind of money.

These were the immediate questions whose answers he wanted.

Lucy's Vega simply would not do. An excellent little car for running about in, it was too small for Shayne. It lacked both the power and speed needed for real emergencies when such things could mean life or death.

So he took time to visit a car rental whose manager he knew, left the Vega there and departed for Acacia Place in a rugged new-model Oldsmobile, a dealer's car that had been sufficiently road-tested to have the kinks out.

It was not his Buick with its telephone and special compartments for reserve weapons, but it would do. It would have to do.

After a couple of false turns, Shayne found Acacia Place. Even the flattering soft twilight failed to mask its run-down tawdriness. There were no sidewalks with numbered curbs and the only street sign he found, leaning like a falling tree, indicated that he was entering the 300 block — if this winding, half-dirt byway could be called a block.

He proceeded cautiously past an eroded intersection with a similar road, wondered how he was going to find 212, then pulled

to a halt as he spotted Ramon's old Mercury parked half hidden by a ragged stand of cypress. He pulled in behind it, off the road, got out and looked around for Ramon.

Moving with care, gun in hand, taking advantage of such cover as there was, Mike Shayne searched. The whole area seemed too silent, deserted. Not even a bird's twilight song broke the stillness.

So where in hell was Ramon? Shayne found him lying face down alongside a gone-to-seed pyrocantthus bush that half-covered the narrow driveway it was supposed to flank. Just beyond the fingers of his right hand lay his revolver, a six-shot Smith & Wesson.

An ugly furrow, still bleeding, had creased Ramon's scalp.

As the redhead moved to turn him over and pull him clear, a shot cracked loud in the silence and a bullet whistled two feet over his head. Shayne said, "*Son of a bitch!*" and flung himself flat, automatic in hand. His movement jarred the unconscious man and another shot cracked out, another bullet whined overhead.

His grey eyes narrow, Shayne saw the trip wire across the path that had been pulled by the fallen man's left loafer. He gave the leg another tug and a third bullet sped past them.

His teeth flashed in a smile as he disentangled the booby trap from Ramon's foot, resulting in a fourth discharge. He examined his

friend's scalp wound before pulling him to a sitting position, his back supported by the rough trunk of a palm tree.

He slapped Ramon's face, said, "Wake up, man. You're not dead yet."

VII

RAMON RODRIGUEZ opened his eyes, got them in focus, said, "*Mr. Shayne!* What happened?" Then, with a moan, "*Jesu — my head!*"

"Just creased," the redhead assured him. "You triggered a trip wire in the path."

"*Jesu, it hurts.*" Ramon rolled to a sitting position, holding his head in both hands. Then, dropping them and opening his eyes, "*Mr. Shayne, Eloise is inside the house.*"

"How do you know that, Ramon?" the detective asked.

"I got a phone call. I was going crazy back at the office. I'd just come in. I was looking everywhere for Eloise."

"Anything special about it?"

Ramon winced as he ran fingers tentatively over the furrow in his scalp. "An accent," he said. "I don't know."

"Japanese?" Shayne inquired.

"Could be. But Eloise is in there we've got to get her out!"

"Easy, Ramon." The redhead held him back as he reached for his gun. "This house is probably booby-trapped all over." He

paused, then said, "Ramon, you stay right here until I give you a signal. I'm going to reconnoiter."

"We've got to get her out," Ramon insisted.

"That's what we're here for. But we won't help Eloise if we get ourselves knocked out. Stay put till I give you the word."

Mike Shayne moved toward the house, his Remington at the ready, keeping both eyes out for further traps. In the twilight, they proved difficult to spot. He did not find another until he reached the small front porch of the decrepit small house. Had the doormat not looked too new for its surroundings, he might not have spotted it at all.

Lying flat to one side and lifting the corner cautiously, he peeped under to see a wired button beneath, with the wire leading under the door. He replaced the mat with great caution, computing correctly that it was rigged to respond to the down pressure of a foot upon it.

Then he moved carefully around the house, keeping a sharp eye out for traps in the Raggedy Ann shrubbery that crowded its paint-peeling walls.

The back door was wired like the front. Again, the mat looked too new. Retreating to the house corner, Shayne looked for and found a small iron locomotive, a discarded child's toy. He tossed it accurately onto the mat, ducking back as he did so.

There was a muffled explosion and the door seemed to shred as it burst outward, followed by an ugly cloud of thick smoke.

When no one from inside appeared in response to the blast, Mike Shayne picked his way through the debris and entered the house, stepping in gingerly fashion over the still smoking door. He spotted a light switch to his left but did not turn it — for all he knew, the whole house might go up.

Squinting through the darkness, he crossed the small kitchen, past a dining alcove to the living room. A small figure sat in its center, taped to a chair. It was Eloise Rodriguez. She was taped and gagged like a mummy from Ancient Egypt.

He untaped her carefully for fear of further traps, found a final one under the chair's left rear leg, again obviated it by lifting where down-pressure had been expected.

When she could speak, she said in her Spanish accents, "Thank God, *Señor* Shayne — thank *God!*" Then she fainted dead away.

The detective picked her small body up and carried her through the demolished rear entry and around the house. He was barely in time to prevent an unsteady Luis from stepping onto the front porch.

When Ramon saw that his wife was safe, he burst into tears, fol-

lowed by fury. "I'm gonna find the bastard who did this, and I'm gonna take him apart in little pieces," he promised.

"Wait till you're in shape," the redhead told him.

Recovering from her faint after the detective had laid her down gently in the rear seat of his rented Olds, Shayne said, "Get in, Luis. I'm putting you somewhere safe for the night.

"But my car!" Rodriguez protested. "I cannot leave it here, Mr. Shayne." With blood caked over his forehead, he made a grisly looking figure.

"You can report it stolen later, Ramon. You're both going to a hospital."

Shayne got his competitors ensconced in a small private hospital on the outskirts of the city, a place he knew to be reliable. Ramon had insurance cards so there was no trouble getting the couple registered.

The emergency ward doctor said, "The man is really okay, but the woman must remain for observation."

"Keep them both," said the redhead. "An overnight stay won't hurt him."

"*Señor* Shayne, I'm going with you." Ramon, his head wound cleansed and bandaged, looked half human — the rough the considerable area of shaven scalp gave him a zombi look. "If you should meet the man who did this, I must be there."

"The police will want to talk to you," the detective told him. "They'll be here any minute."

"I'm going with you, *Señor* Shayne." There was no arguing with such determination, so the detective reluctantly let his colleague come with him.

Before they walked out, the police arrived, one of them a detective sergeant the redhead knew. He let them go, but not until they had made a preliminary statement as to what had happened at the house on Acacia Place.

The sergeant said, "I ought to hold you both, but I know you'd have Chief Gentry on my back, Shayne. I just hope they don't take my stripes away for this. You sure you don't want a backup from us?"

"Thanks, Winters," Shayne told him. "Not yet."

"This is a heavy criminal charge." Sergeant Winters nodded toward the wing in which Eloise Rodriguez was receiving emergency treatment. "You sure you don't want to lay it on whoever did it?"

"That's the problem," the redhead told him. "Until I get some proof, we haven't got the chance of a snowball in hell of making it stick."

Mike Shayne drove directly back to his office, where he fortified both Ramon and himself with double Martells and then made another try to reach his client by

telephone. To his surprise and relief, she answered the phone herself.

"Mike Shayne here," he told her. "Are you okay?"

"Of course," she replied. "Why not? Ever since you convinced me I was not going out of my mind, I've felt marvelous."

"Just a moment," he said. "Are you still my client?"

"Of course," she replied. "Kirk wants me to drop the whole thing, but until I find out who and what is behind it, I want you to carry on. Have you any progress to report?"

"I'd rather not give it to you over the phone, Eve. Is there any way I can see you?"

"When, Mike?"

"This evening if possible. There have been a number of developments you should know about. Incidentally, are there any extensions on this line?"

"None," she replied. "This is my private phone. Tell me what's happened?"

"Negative," he told her. "One of the men working on you is an electronics wizard from Hollywood. I've got to see you this evening. I assure you it's important."

going out to this big place Kirk picked up for our semi-annual family board meeting. It's just luck you caught me in, Mike. I'm taking off in minutes, just as soon as Kirk has his things packed."

"Has he told you why he offered

me that ten-grand check to give it all up?" the redhead asked her.

"I haven't had a chance to ask him." A note of worry intruded on the confidence in her tone. "I suppose he just wants to put it behind us. He's been a perfect lamb since he got home last night."

"Can't you call this whole thing off — or postpone it?" Shayne inquired.

"No way, Mike. Is there any *special* reason?"

He hesitated, decided against telling her what he had picked up. It could be enough trouble if Wingate discovered he was in Miami, not Tampa. He had no wish to put his client in any added danger."

"Nothing I can tell you now," he said. "All I can advise you is to watch yourself — and everyone else out there. When will you be back?"

"Probably Sunday evening. But this is silly, don't you think? We meet out there at the house for the weekend and listen to reports and then, Sunday morning, hold our meeting and vote. It's always the same — Kirk, Aunt Clara and Cousin Jerry and I vote one way, Jim and Cousin Dick and Uncle Peter the other. It's been that way for years. Why should this time be different?"

"Why should anyone try to prove you mentally incompetent just before this meeting?" the detective countered.

"I . . ." Eve Williams hesitated. "I don't know. I haven't thought of it that way." She sounded frightened, added, "Mike, what should I do?"

"Watch yourself," he repeated, "since you're going to be on your own. And watch everybody else. If anything — no matter how little — looks out of order, call me. I'll be in touch with my answering service."

"Where will you *be*?" she asked.

"As of this moment, I don't know," the detective told her. "Trying to look after your interests. Keep an eye out for your Japanese friend — and for Oliver Andrews, too. They're both bad news."

"Oh . . ." Eve Willimas sounded suddenly reassured. "They'd never be allowed inside the gates."

"Maybe not — but if you see either of them and can't get me, call the police. I'll have Chief of Detectives Len Sturgis primed."

He hung up, looked at Ramon in frustration, said, "That's the chief problem in our business — clients."

He began to dial Police Headquarters . . .

VIII

LEN STURGIS was not on duty but was expected to look in later. Not wishing to give what he had to any lesser authority, Mike Shayne left

a call-back and hung up.

"No soap," he told Ramon.

"Let me call the hospital," said Ramon, who had revived considerably under stimulus of the brandy the redhead had given him. After a brief conversation, the Cuban slammed the instrument back in its cradle and said, "She's under sedation. It seems she'd been suffering from concussion. That bastard — he must have hit her on the head." His dark eyes burned like live coals.

"It's too soon to expect results — but I'm certain your Eloise will be all right."

Ramon was stirred to the roots of his Latin machoism. He shook his head and uttered a string of curses and vengeance threats in his native Spanish the detective only half understood.

But Ramon was beginning to bother him. He seemed on the verge of detonation. Shayne was beginning to worry about his friend's usefulness as a companion in his present emotional condition. He poured the younger detective another drink, a powerful one.

Ramon drained it as if the high-proof cognac were water, said, "How can we sit here doing nothing while my Eloise may be dying and your client is in danger?"

"We have no proof of either, Ramon," the redhead assured him. He glanced out the window, saw that night had fully fallen at

last. Despite Ramon's restlessness, the detective felt an indecision foreign to his nature. If he tried to crack the Taylor Barton estate too early, he might blow the whole game. On the other hand, if he didn't...

He let it hang, reached for the bottle himself. His stomach growled hungrily as he did so. And then the phone rang.

"The hospital!" Ramon cried, making a grab for the instrument. Shayne fended him off, picked it up himself.

Jack Radford's mellow Georgia accent greeted his hello. The operator of The Gables said, "Mike, it just occurred to me you might like to know that the parties you were interested in have had a change of plan. They're here now, playing the wheel."

"All of them?" Shayne inquired.

"The whole kit and kaboodle — Jim Gordon and his Marie, a quartet of what appears to be relatives, even Kirk Williams himself."

"How's my client?" the redhead asked.

"She's the only one not present and accounted for," the gambling house boss told him. "I thought you'd like to know."

"Thanks, Jack." Shayne's worry corrugated with thought.

"You've done a few for me." Radford hung up.

The detective dialed Eve Gordon Williams' private number

again. He counted fourteen rings of the phone. There was no answer. Slowly, he replaced the instrument in its cradle.

"Yes?" Ramon's curiosity sounded intense.

"Yes!" Mike Shayne replied. He tugged at the lobe of his left ear again, then slapped both big hands palm down on the tabletop in front of him. "It's time to move. Are you sure you're okay, Ramon?"

"Okay? All I want is a chance to string out that bastard's guts like a cat's cradle." Wild looking in his dishevelled condition, Ramon lurched to his feet, staggered, grabbed the table and fell forward, crying, "Don't go without me, Señor."

Almost tenderly, the detective cold-cocked him. If he was facing the sort of setup he suspected, Ramon would simply be adding to the risks, might be a factor in bringing on needless disaster.

Shayne left the office light on but made sure the door was locked behind him. He could see the pattern shaping up against Eve Williams all too clearly. The exact circumstances underlying the conspiracy against his client were necessarily unclear. After all, he knew nothing about the inner politics of the Gordon-Williams conglomerate — there had been insufficient time for him to untangle their intricacies — but the pattern was clear.

With hundreds of millions of

dollars at stake, perhaps a billion, desperate measures in what had to be a battle for control were not exactly surprising.

What had his client told him? As he moved the Oldsmobile through the Miami night, Shayne culled his well-trained memory. He could hear her beautifully modulated voice saying, "It's always the same — Kirk, Aunt Clara and Cousin Jerry and I vote one way, Jim and Cousin Dick and Uncle Peter the other. It's been that way for years."

With Eve removed from voting via mental incompetence or any other method, the vote would be deadlocked. He had a hunch the attempt at her removal had been dictated by the fact that Eve was a strong minded young woman who would not alter her vote over a matter of expediency.

With Eve removed, he wondered if Aunt Clara or Cousin Jerry would hold the line. Would Kirk Williams hold the line? Evidently, his client's opponents thought not.

Plan-A aborted — Plan-B rolling. Shayne presumably out of town, Eve Williams visiting the Taylor Barton mansion alone while the others established their alibis at Jack Radford's The Gables.

And Tachi Ozaki and Eddie Wingate's whereabouts were presently unknown.

He remained puzzled by the attempt on Eloise Rodriguez but judged that neither of his current

opponents was averse to engaging in the acts of personal vendetta should time and opportunity offer. Thanks to the methods used, he suspected Ozaki was the party chiefly involved in the abduction and attempted murder of Ramon via the booby traps on Acadia Place.

As he approached his destination, Mike Shayne concentrated on how he was going to get inside. It was important he get there quickly. He judged himself to be fairly close behind his client.; So how to get inside without getting either or both of them killed? That was the question.

Then there was the little matter of how to get inside the link-fenced estate without being detected. After driving around it on a winding, two lane macadam road the redhead decided this would be impossible in the time he felt he had left at his disposal.

Therefore, he would have to take steps.

The night was warm, virtually without breeze. Turning the Olds around, he returned to an area where the fence ran quite close to the various outbuildings at the rear of the estate.

He had noted something on his previous round, a number of small metal boxes well up on the link fence at regular intervals, judged them to be either fire or theft alarms. Leaving the car, he was able to locate a pile of cypress brush and pile it against the fence

directly under the alarm box.

Taking out his cigaret lighter, the redhead set fire to the brush-pile in a number of places, prayed that the tiny blaze would not smoulder out before he got inside the estate as he drove back to the main entance. Stopping there, he honked twice and waited for action.

A custodian emerged from a gatehouse. Shayne noted that a holstered revolver hung from his belt. Without opening the portal, he said, "This is private property, sir."

"I know it is. I'm here to report to Mrs. Williams. Will you tell her Mr. Shayne is here?"

"She just got in." The custodian hesitated, then returned to the gatehouse. Moments later, he emerged once more, pressed the button that caused the heavy link steel barrier to swing open. "You'll see the house around the bend in the driveway, Mr. Shayne," he said politely.

So far, so good, the detective thought. He did not know how Eve Williams' enemies were planning to operate against her. But, in such a place, with at least some of the servants loyal to their mistress, there had to be problems for them. He doubted that a self-evident crime of violence would serve their purpose. If it would, such an elaborate scheme as Plan-A would not have been employed.

His client was standing in the

open doorway of the mansion as Mike Shayne entered. She looked genuinely glad to see him.

As she ushered him inside, she said, her voice low, "I don't know why the others aren't here. At the last moment, Kirk took a call and asked me to drive on up here alone and took off. It's not like him. I'm damn glad you turned up."

"They're all at The Gables," he told her as she led him over rich Persian carpets from the two story great hall into a living room of near-hockey-rink dimensions. She stopped abruptly to turn and stare at him, her dark eyes alarmed.

"But . . ." she began, then hesitated. "Why, I can't believe it! It's almost as if . . ." Again she trailed off.

Mike Shayne picked it up for her. "It's almost as if you were being set up."

"But, I don't understand." She stood there, staring at him, close to a long damascened table set along the back of a long overstuffed sofa.

You told me you always held the deciding vote in the family trust board meetings," he said. "Does that suggest anything to you, Eve?"

"But that's impossible," she told him. "In that case, why don't they just . . . ?"

"Probably because they know you won't knuckle under," the detective told her.

"Well, I wouldn't," she replied. "Our corporation is still private and my father and grandfather made us promise to keep it that way. All Jim wants is more money for his gambling from public sale of the stock. Of course, it would run into billions probably, but why? We're rich enough as it is."

"Some people are never rich enough," he suggested.

"But Kirk — he wouldn't betray me like this."

"Remember his offer to me," the redhead spoke softly.

There was a cry of alarm and a thud from the hallway they had just left. Mike Shayne moved with snakelike speed for the Remington on his hip. But he was not quite quick enough.

"Too bad you didn't stay in Tampa, Shayne," said Eddie Wingate. "Your return makes it awkward for everybody — especially for your client and you."

IX

EDDIE WINGATE stood there, looking like a scarecrow in black-and-white footman's uniform. The detective noted that his own Colt .45 was held firmly in Wingate's right fist. The lanky blackmail artist wore a saturnine smile on his angular face.

Behind him, standing over another footman, Shayne got his second look at Tachi Ozaki, also with an automatic pistol in

his right hand. The man Tachi had felled lay face down on the costly carpet.

"Drop the gun, Shayne," said Wingate. "We don't want any more trouble."

Mike Shayne made a move as if to obey. Then, coiling his muscles, he launched a sudden leap for his client. She let out a cry of alarm as his big left shoulder struck her, diaphragm high, catapulting both of them over both the table and the sofa beyond to slide off its soft cushions to the carpeted floor.

The redhead rolled clear of his client and drew his Remington from its holster as he scrambled toward the end nearer his two opponents. A shot rang out and a bullet thumped into the sofa's back near the other end and he heard Wingate cry, "No, Tachi — no!"

But if Wingate didn't want a shootout here in the fine old mansion, Mike Shayne was quite willing and ready. The enemy would hesitate before murdering Eve Williams, since further violence would frustrate their employer's desire to steamroller the board-control vote at the Sunday meeting.

An act of open murder on Eve Williams would inevitably result in both criminal and civil investigations that would tie up corporate control of the conglomerate for an indeterminate time. Otherwise, as the redhead reasoned it, there

would never have been the elaborate effort to prove his client incompetent to vote.

Shayne peered around the near end of the sofa in time to look into the eye of Ozaki's gun-muzzle some fifteen feet away. The detective fired first and shot the gun out of the Japanese's right hand, removing two fingers with the same bullet.

Ozaki yelped in pain and turned toward the door. Eddie Wingate cursed and darted sideways for the shelter of the wall between hall and living room. Shayne fired and would have shot him down but for the fact that his client rolled across his legs as she sat up, causing him to miss by inches.

When the redhead had scrambled cautiously to his feet, he discovered that the blackmail artist had fled the scene, as a side door in the hall was just closing.

Shayne could hear the sound of Wingate's receding footsteps. He turned toward the man he had already shot — just in time to see Ozaki reaching for his own weapon with his left hand. Blood was spouting profusely from his right paw.

Mike Shayne put a foot on the gun and pulled it clear, stooped and picked it up.

"You bastard!" said the electronics wizard. Then his head thudded against the carpet as he passed out.

"He needs attention." Eve

Williams spoke. She had risen from behind the sofa and lifted her skirt partway, revealing a lace-edged slip beneath. With a single quick gesture, she ripped off a strip, knelt by the fallen criminal and, using a letter opener to apply torque, made a tourniquet around his upper right arm to staunch the bleeding.

For a moment, Mike Shayne looked on in admiration. Then his attention was caught by another figure that had silently entered via the front door while the brief action was in progress.

Marie Hale Gordon stood there, a blazing blonde beauty in a white satin evening pants suit, a gold-plated revolver held firmly in her fist.

"Put it down, Mike Shayne," she said, and there was nothing to do but obey and let his Remington thud to the carpet. Then she began to curse him with a flow of obscenities the redhead had never heard topped in his rough-and-tumble life.

Then she turned on Eve and excoriated her as seventeen different varieties of snob, tightwad and all around ice-hearted bitch. Shayne's client stood there, taking it like a thoroughbred, her chin held high and her eyes cool. Finally, Marie said, "But you've had it, both of you."

Her attention had turned to her sister-in-law and Mike Shayne took advantage of it to make another move. He leapt to his

left, dropped to the carpet, swept his Remington back into his right fist.

But Marie Gordon stopped him, saying, "You make one more mistake, you bastard, and I'm drilling Eve right through her snotty little belly button." Then called, "Eddie, you yellow dog, where are you? Get the hell back here. I knew I couldn't trust you two not to mess things up. It's a good thing I came out here early to make sure you didn't goof."

Where, Shayne wondered, were the other servants? Why had none of them called the police? Or had Marie arranged things so that only Wingate and Ozaki and the felled footman were in the mansion at this time?

The detective glanced warily at the footman, saw that he still lay on his face just inside the door, beginning to stir with the return of consciousness. Shayne called out to him, "Lie still, man!"

It was a hoary ruse, but it worked. For an instant, Marie's attention flickered and an instant was enough for the redhead. His long, low, headlong dive caught Marie Gordon across the thighs, knocked her backward fifteen feet to crash into the wall alongside the front door.

The gold plated revolver flew through the air as she struck the barrier and lay still, dazed, giving the redhead enough time to recover both her revolver and his own Remington.

Shaking herself, Marie scrambled to her feet and flew at Eve, her hands taloned claws. Mike Shayne stepped to his client's defense, but there was no need. Timing it perfectly, Eve Williams felled her sister-in-law with a solid right to the chops.

Marie collapsed, sobbing with frustration, still uttering curses against the woman she so evidently hated.

It was then that the fire sirens sounded . . .

The following afternoon, Eve Williams walked into Mike Shayne's inner office. The detective, seated behind his desk, jumped to his feet in astonishment as he spotted her in the doorway.

She noted his reaction and smiled a little half-smile and said, "Why not, Mike? You and I still have business to conclude."

"But there's no hurry," he told her. "After what you've been through . . ." He let it hang as he

waved her into a chair and reached for the bottle of Martell in his file.

"As a matter of fact," she told him as she accepted the offered drink, "it's a relief to get out of the apartment."

He nodded. "I can buy that," he said. "What about your husband?"

"It's over, of course," she told him. "Oh, I forgave him — but I could never trust him again, I'm afraid. He's going to resign from the corporation when we

have our meeting — it's been postponed for two weeks. Then I'm going somewhere and get a quiet divorce."

Shayne said, "Just what was his problem? I never did find out. It must have been pretty heavy to make him play ball with Marie and her little group of lovelies."

She sighed, said, "He told me all about it. It seems, when he was just getting started, that he stole some bonds from his father's bank. It gave him the jump he wanted early in his career. The bonds were replaced, but not until his father found out what he'd done. He made Kirk sign a written confession which was to be revealed to the police only if he did something wrong again. Somehow, Eddie Wingate found out and put the pressure on . . ."

She sighed, sipped her drink, added, "Have they caught that bastard yet?"

"He's a slippery eel," the detective told her. Chief Gentry is fit to be tied at losing him twice. But sooner or later . . .

"What about Marie and your brother?" he added after a pause to finish his own glass.

"Well, Marie has had it as far as the family or what's left of it is concerned. Jim's full of contrition. Apparently he had no idea what was really going on. There'll be another divorce." A moment of silence, then, "Dammit, Mike, why can't Jim and I make decent marriages?"

"You probably will," he assured her quietly. "When you get around to it."

"Thanks," she said. "I hope you're right. And we have a bit of business to wrap up." She opened her handbag, took out a checkbook and pen.

The check she wrote was for \$10,000. She laid it in front of him, said in front of him, said, "It's not nearly enough. But you have the other check Kirk gave you, remember?"

"I was going to tear it up. It seems to me I've caused you nothing but trouble."

"You saved my sanity, Mike. And you uncovered the people behind it. I wonder how they planned to get rid of me last night?"

"The police got that from Ozaki," Shayne told her. "They planned to sandbag you. Properly delivered, it leaves no trace of violence, goes down as a cerebral hemorrhage."

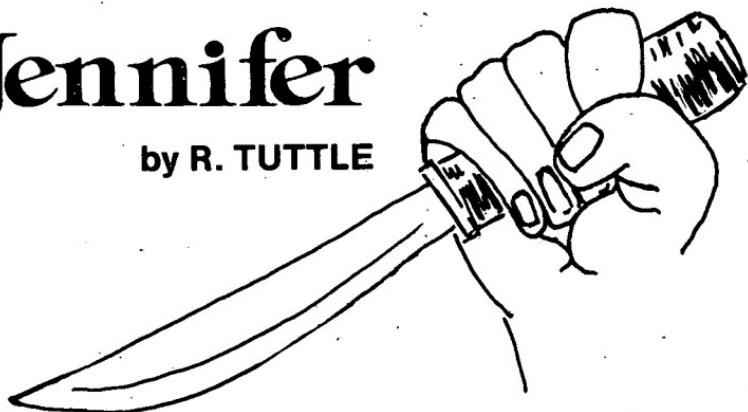
"You saved me from that, too." She rose, said, "Mike, I owe you so much, I . . ."

There was no mistaking the invitation. The redhead understood her need in this time of crisis. He also thought she was one of the most attractive and perhaps the bravest female he had ever met. and Lucy would be in Tampa another two days.

He got to his feet, said, "I'm closing the office right now . . ."

Jennifer

by R. TUTTLE



When the killer came to get old Jethro,
he thought the dark would protect him.

OLD JETHRO WHITE sipped his lukewarm coffee and sat in the darkness of his front room, listening intently. There was a prowler out there again, probably the same fellow who had tried to rob him last week. He'd called the sheriff then and the prowler, who had turned out to be an escaped murderer, had been hauled off to jail.

His last words, "I'll get you for this, old man!" were still ringing in Jethro's ears. Jethro shook his head in mild disgust. The man had broken out of the town jail the next night.

Actually, Jethro found the term "old man" more disturbing than the threat, despite the fact that just about everybody in the tiny

coastal town called him Old Jethro. Fifty-eight wasn't old. Crippled from a shell burst in Guadalcanal, his back and face mangled, Jethro just looked old.

A dead branch snapped under a heavy foot, a sharp, crackle of bone dry wood. The man out there was obviously a lead-footed clod.

Jethro frowned thoughtfully. Should he call the sheriff — or get his rifle out of the closet and take care of the man himself?

The latter notion appealed to him. Aiming at sounds was a skill he'd developed to perfection in the Marine Corps. During those hectic months of jungle warfare in the South Pacific, he had reached a point where he could hit a sneeze in the pitch darkness of the jungle.

World War II — the big one. He'd been young, a well built, blond giant who had thrived on the rigors of the Marine Corps and had loved the high adventure of kill or be killed.

The bushes crackled outside again and a nasal voice rang out.

"Gonna get you, ole man! Try phoning the sheriff!"

Jethro picked up the telephone and found it dead. The noisy clod had cut the phone line.

No choice now. He'd have to get his gun.

He rose painfully and shuffled across the dark living room to the closet where he extracted his rifle from under some boxes. After loading it, he went back to the window and aimed the gun in the general direction of the last sound.

Another rustle. This time the noise came from another part of the yard. He shifted the gun. The clod was playing games with him. Jethro had played deadly games like this with some of the best players in the world — thirty odd years ago. He'd been the best man in his outfit at shooting at sounds. At his peak, he could locate a footstep and kill its maker with one bullet.

A rock hit the side of the house, followed by a hushed giggle. Jethro shifted the rifle slightly. Oddly enough, he wasn't nervous. A bit shaky perhaps, but then he'd been shaky for years.

Silence. Even the distant pounding surf and the night breeze

seemed dampened by the impromtu drama of life and death. It was almost as though Nature had paused to watch.

Jennifer's lovely young face suddenly popped into his mind. Her willowy, vibrant young body appeared and she seemed to be gliding toward him, smiling — but not getting any closer. He'd met Jennifer on leave in Melbourne, Australia, and had immediately fallen in love with this beautiful creature from down under. She was exciting, lovable, a far cry from the brassy floozies found in bars and on street corners.

And she had returned that love — violently. He could still feel her warm, full body and see her long, golden locks flowing about her flawless face as they held each other.

Another rock hit the side of the house.

"I got a knife, old man! And I'm gonna cut you up!"

Jethro shifted the gun slightly. *Keep talking, clod.*

Jethro and Jennifer had planned to get married after the war and settle down on a farm in Vermont to raise maple syrup, crops and blond kids who would learn how to ski and skate. They'd talked for hours about marriage on that last Sunday before he went back to his outfit.

A rock fell on the roof and rolled off. Jethro detected a moving foot and shifted the rifle.

Jethro's last view of Jennifer

had been her slender figure standing on top of a grassy rise in front of her home. Her arms were waving, and her eyes were full of tears.

Exactly a week later, a grenade had gone off in back of him — destroying his youth and, for a while, destroying his will to live. Goodby, Jennifer. You'll have to find someone else. Jethro's a broken man.

He had never seen her again.

The years had gone by slowly — odd jobs — men and women slobbering over his broken body — and now he was retired with a pension, with a madman out in his yard.

There was a loud footstep in the bushes — as though the last act of the drama was coming up. He shifted the rifle and waited.

Jennifer would be in her fifties now. What was she like? Fat? Gabby? No matter. To him, she would always be the young, blonde bundle of exciting love and mother of his children who never had a chance to be born.

A rock came through the window, hit him on the shoulder and clattered to the floor. Then, came the laugh.

"You're a dead old man!"

That was all Jethro needed. He pulled the rifle slightly to the left and squeezed the trigger. The shot was followed by a brief scream of pain.

"Hey! I was only kid — !"

Another shot put Mr. Clod out

of action, and Nature resumed her night sounds.

Jethro shrugged. Two bullets? Well — after such a long layoff ...

He put the gun back in the closet, lit a cigar and sat by the window again. As he listened to the pounding surf and the soft rustle of leaves, he could almost hear Jennifer.

"Jethro honey — I love you — always will."

The next morning, Sheriff Lanthum knocked on the door.

"Come in," said Jethro who was pouring a cup of coffee in the kitchen.

"Me, Jethro," said the Sheriff. He walked in.

"Morning, Sheriff." Jethro sat down at the kitchen table. "Pour yourself some coffee."

Lanthum poured a cup and sat down. "Well, Jethro, that escaped killer won't bother you any more. Somebody shot him last night — right out in your front yard. Did you hear anything?"

Jethro shrugged. "I'm always hearing things out there. Seems like I heard something like a gun. Got any idea who did it?"

"No." Lanthum chuckled. "If I didn't know better, I'd suspect you, Jethro but I guess you couldn't shoot a man even if you had a gun." He looked around the neat kitchen. "You know, you do a great job taking care of yourself — being blind like you are."

Jethro sipped his coffee. "A guy does what he has to do, Sheriff."

Catch Me The Killer

by KEN SMITH

After dealing with scores of rape murders, homicide Sergeant Mike Randall begins to fear, with reason, that he may be a psychotic killer himself.

GREY MISTS FROM the river, made darker by the night and the nearness of the buildings, played shadow tag between him and the body on the ground. The metal object in his hand felt strange, as if it were weightless. Blood spread from beneath the woman's body in a widening stain, then slowly began to lap at his feet like a gentle wave against a low pier. The mists wet his face.

Mike Randall woke abruptly, every muscle tight to the point of trembling. His face was wet — sweat-wet — the pillow soaked as well. It was so real. So damn real. He had killed her in a dream. Killed a woman whose face he didn't recognize.

He sat on the edge of the bed and reached for a cigaret, then noticed his hand trembled as he lit it. It was morning already, the first light of dawn was fighting its way to his window.

He'd barely gotten to bed. But then he'd been drunk when he lay down, the stink of whisky was still in the room. Come to think of it he

didn't really remember going to bed. The last thing he remembered was going out in search of another bottle when he'd emptied the first. That...and the dream.

The harsh clamor of the phone startled him and he looked at it in anger. But then he shrugged and reached for it, knowing who would be on the other end. Nobody else ever called.

"Yeah, Chief."

Chief of Detectives Henry Martin chuckled softly, a rasping chuckle that grated on Mike's nerves. "Knew it was me already, huh?" His voice turned apologetic. "Listen, Mike. I'm sorry to call you on your first day off in — what, three weeks?

"Four," Mike growled into the phone. And I'm the only detective you've got who doesn't have a family to raise Cain with you, he thought savagely.

"Yeah, four. Listen, I promise you a week off.

"What've you got?" Mike asked.

"Murder," the Chief said.

"Right in your neighborhood too. Young woman was beaten to death. Waitress, I think."

It came down on him like a falling elevator. His neighborhood! The weight pressed around him until he couldn't breathe and he shook violently.

The voice in his ear continued as if the conversation was still normal. "Sandy's out of town for the day or I'd call him in, too. Can you get on this right away?"

"Yeah," Mike said, struggling to get the words up through the weight in his chest. "I'll — get some breakfast first. At Angelo's, if anything breaks quick. See you in thirty minutes."

"Thanks, Mike. You know I appreciate it."

He hung up the phone without answering.

He skipped breakfast, his stomach and nerves refused any thought of it. Coffee, two quick mugs, heavy on the cream, had to do. Chief Martin was out in the squad room waiting for him with a manila envelope in his hand. He flipped it open on Mike's desk.

"Uniforms in a car found her," he began. "She was in an alley just off Hunter, about three blocks from where you're staying now. They ran a routine light in the alley and spotted her. Rogers and Morrison did the preliminary, got the pictures and searched the place. Turned up nothing so far. Coroner says she died of massive hemorrhage but it doesn't take an

expert to see that. Look."

He turned the report over to reveal the first photograph beneath it and Mike felt his stomach churn.

She lay on the ground with the wide stain beneath her. Her face was a mess. No wonder he didn't recognize her — what the hell was he thinking! Of course he didn't recognize her. Last night was a dream. And this was real.

"You all right, Mike?" The Chief was looking at him strangely.

"Yeah," he said. "Not awake yet. Had a couple too many last night."

The Chief chuckled again. That damned, grating laugh of his. "Done that a couple of times myself. But you go easy. I don't want to lose my best man to a bottle."

He ignored it. "No I D?"

"Not yet," the Chief nodded. "No wallet, no pocketbook. Killer must have taken them."

Good. That was good. Robbery meant it wasn't a senseless killing. A psychopathic murder by somebody who didn't know what he was doing.

The alley looked familiar, but then he expected that. There were hundreds of them over this city and he'd been in a lot of them. It was also clean of any evidence. But he went over it painstakingly, with the advantage of more daylight than Rogers and Morrison had had.

He went through the trash blown up against the building at the end, sifted through the three cans near a locked door. He even crab-walked fifteen feet or more in each direction from the chalk outline marking the body position.

Nothing. Not a trace of the two people who had been there the night before, the one that remained behind and the one that left with a murder weapon in his hand.

She had been a waitress, or something that required a white uniform. Not a nurse — no white stockings or shoes. He gave up on the alley and sat in his car, making up a list of cheap restaurants and diners in the vicinity from a phone book he kept in the rear seat.

It was a way to start. First find out who she was and then, maybe, why she was here in this alley or on the street near it. He finished the list and then numbered it to save backtracking. The first place was two blocks away.

Ten minutes later, he checked it off the list. No waitress missing and none who fit the description of the woman. The manager hadn't even heard of the murder. This was a big city and crime was on the increase. A solitary murder wasn't that big in the news anymore unless it was somebody important. And she hadn't been important.

He quit late, ate a meal he didn't really want in the last cafe,

and went back to his room. The bottle on his dresser was still open. He ignored it, took a shower and fell into the bed. His head hurt and his gut was on fire from the lousy meal. Maybe he wouldn't dream. Maybe he'd just sleep. He sure as hell was tired enough.

But he didn't sleep. His mind kept coming back to the woman in the alley. Her face changed, lost its battered look, and Carrol was staring up at him with unseeing eyes. He brushed that away and she was alive again. Looking at him with that thinking expression on her face as if she couldn't make up her mind about something.

That expression had bothered him. But he hadn't really time to talk to her to find out what the matter was. The job had always seemed to be in the way. And then she was gone. She *had* been trying to make up her mind.

She left him cold, without even a goodby, Carrol and some airline pilot. He didn't even know the guy's name. But he had been told by a friend of hers who worked with her that they were living in St. Louis.

Funny how things change and remain the same. His mother had done the same thing to his father when he was eight. Just up and left. Only she cut out on her kid too. Carrol's leaving still hurt, but it didn't do to him what the other did to his father. He didn't break down. His father had lost his man-

hood — his self respect. Two years of feeling like he was nothing and then he'd walked into the river on a dark night.

Carrol's face was gone. He was far enough back in memories to be looking at his Aunt Margaret again. A sharp face, full of anger. She hated him. And she hated herself because she hadn't the guts to refuse to take him in and insist that the County put him in a foster home.

As soon as he realized why she hated him, he left. He made it on his own from the time he was sixteen, thanks to a little lying on a birth certificate, the Marines and a war that needed warm bodies.

He gave it up at last. The whisky was warm in his mouth, stale from the closeness of the room. He took a couple of hard belts and hit the bed again.

Sandy McDougal was waiting for him when he came down to the street the next morning, relaxed behind the wheel with his straw blond hair a beacon you could spot a block away. He was as big as Mike himself and only a year younger but somehow he always managed to look like an oversize, tow-headed kid.

"Hi, pal," he grinned when Mike opened the door. "Enjoy your twenty-four hour vacation?"

"What vacation? Martin dragged me in before I got awake."

Sandy's grin turned into sympathy. "Never ends, does it? Wish

the bad guys were in some sort of union. You know, with paid vacations and holidays? What've you got?"

"Murder, what else?" he said. "It's all we've been doing lately." Briefly he sketched in the details, including his fruitless efforts to identify the girl.

Sandy nodded. "Sounds like that's all we got to go on, though. Wanna check in and then keep hitting the eating places further out? Or start on the doctor and dental offices?"

"Let's stick with the waitress for a little while," he said. "You see the pictures, she looks like a waitress. Know what I mean?"

There were no new developments from the squad room and they spent most of the morning in the same routine Mike had followed the day before. They found her by eleven-thirty. Brenda Peterson. She worked in a cafe halfway across town, well away from a reason for being on Hunter Street.

But Brenda had failed to come to work and fitted the description. Her address was a cheap apartment on Highland, and with a search warrant they found her laughing at them from a framed photograph on a neat little window table. Brenda and a thick-haired guy in a sailor's uniform.

The rest of the day was spent in the neighborhood, trying to piece her life together. But nobody had answers. Finally an old man, the

kind who would know all the unattached women in the area, came up with some pieces. Brenda didn't go out much, he never saw her with a man. But she had a red-haired girl friend. Spent a lot of time together. Tall girl, a looker, you know what I mean? Hard to miss one like that.

"Yeah, hard to miss." He looked at Sandy and the other nodded. A waitress who fitted that description worked at one of the places they had checked. They headed for the car.

This one's name was Susan Keller. She had a wide, sensual mouth and a uniform that strained to cover the curves.

Yes, she knew Brenda. They had met when they worked together and kept in touch when each split for another job. Why? What could the police want with Brenda Peterson?

Sandy was better at it than Mike. He told her gently and held her shoulders when she broke down. Mike's look gave the curious patrons a lesson in minding your own business.

The owner let Susan off and they gave her a ride home while she filled them in on the details of Brenda Peterson's life between fits of sobbing. It wasn't much of a life: Sailor husband killed in an accident. Parents too poor to go back to, and a lonely girl who had married too young to know how to make much of a living for herself. Well, she didn't have to worry

about that now.

The next day was a blank as far as Brenda Peterson was concerned. Absolute zero. Hardly anyone knew her, she seemed to have no friends, much less enemies who would want to kill her. A few steady customers where she worked knew her, but she had no dates and no boyfriends. No reason at all to be on Hunter Street on a dark and lonely night.

He was tired. Tired of looking for a life for Brenda Peterson, and tired of the half dozen other things he'd had to do in the twelve-hour day he'd just put in. He'd forgotten to stop by the cleaners for his other suit, too. That meant he'd have to wear this one three days in a row.

He hung it up and began to rummage through one of the cardboard boxes he'd never bothered to unpack when he moved, to dig out some more clothes. He got as far as an old pair of slacks he'd worn when he tried to paint the house back in the Spring and quit.

He slipped the pants on and started to pour another drink, then paused. With a shrug he put the glass down and brought the bottle itself over to the bed to stretch out.

That had been another thing between him and Carroll. She'd been after him for a year or more to paint the house. And when he finally got around to it, she'd said it was too early in the year. The

weather wasn't warm enough. What the hell difference did it make as long as it wasn't raining? But that was another argument. They argued all the time the last year. She'd said he wasn't a man, he was a machine — a police machine. Punch his button and he investigated...

THIS TIME it was real, he was convinced of it. The woman screamed, threw up her arms and turned her back to protect herself. But he beat her anyway, clubbed her to the ground and continued until her screams stopped.

He woke up, shaking violently. The sheets were ripped and pulled nearly off the bed where he had struggled. It was a dream. It had to be a dream. He was here in this room. Here by himself. It had to be a dream...

The phone rang.

Sandy was there, ten minutes after Mike hung up the phone. "Same M O?" he inquired as Mike got in the car.

"Yeah. Woman's a little older. But she... She got the same treatment."

"Looks like another long day," Sandy said, pulling away from the curb. "You all right, Mike?"

"Why? Why did you ask that?" Mike demanded.

"Hey! Take it easy, partner. You just looked a little shook, that's all. Don't get jumpy on me."

Mike forced himself to be calm. "Sorry. Guess I didn't sleep too well."

"Yeah. I know what you mean. This job can get to you." Sandy made a left turn and immediately began to slow. Ahead, they could see a uniform cruiser with its blue flasher still darting beams of light across the buildings.

"Damn, Mike," Sandy said. "This one was almost under your window. Maybe I ought to interview you."

"That isn't funny." Mike growled. His nerves were screaming again.

Sandy shut off the motor and glanced at him. "Sure, partner," he said. "It wasn't funny. Sorry."

But there was an odd look in his eyes.

The woman was lying on her stomach just like he expected she'd be. He wanted to scream. Wanted to run or to smash his head against the brick wall of the building. Anything except what he had to do.

He knelt and looked at the body, his stomach heaving, while Sandy wrote down the details from the uniform policeman. The throbbing in his ears made it hard for him to hear.

The victim was found, like the Peterson girl, by a cruiser on patrol. A dark alley and no witnesses. And no I D. He reached in his pocket for chalk and marked the body, forcing himself to look at

the face carefully as he did. He didn't recognize her. He didn't know this woman lying dead in an alley. But what did that mean?

The coroner came and took her away and he and Sandy started their search of the alley. But he knew they wouldn't find anything. The killer was smart. He left no trace. Like he *knew* what policemen would be looking for.

They sat in the car and discussed what their moves would be. This one wore no uniform — nothing to give a clue as to what she might have been.

"Well," Sandy said at last. "Guess the only thing to do is phone in a report and start digging around here. You want to call?"

"No. Go ahead. There's a booth across the street."

He'd had his head down, thinking. That was the only reason he spotted it in the gutter. The car door stood open, he'd left it that way for air, and he could see the object in the gutter. But Sandy couldn't. Not from the driver's side.

He waited until Sandy was in the phone booth, then quickly bent down and picked up the belt buckle. It was Marine Corps, battered and scratched from long usage. He had one himself that he wore with work pants around the house. Or did he still have one?

His hand shook. One way to find out. If there was another buckle in one of the cardboard boxes...

But what if there wasn't? He

had to go on being a detective. Had to continue to search for a killer who might turn out to be himself. Suppose it was? Suppose he was two people? One a cop and the other a psychopath who killed women in the night.

What would happen when he and Sandy found the other man that was Mike Randall? Would he convert at that point? When the evidence pointed to him, would he become somebody else and try to kill his partner, too?

He thought of the hospital for the criminally insane and was sick again, dizzy enough to grasp the seat back to keep from falling.

Sandy came back with a puzzled look on his face. "Hey, Mike, this is a little weird. The lab people got on this one right away. Know what they found under her nails? Wool threads, like would be in a sweater. Now who the hell would be wearing a sweater in August?"

"It's not been all that hot," he said.

"Yeah. But it sure hasn't been cold. Not sweater cold."

"Okay. Man in a sweater. Anything else?"

Sandy nodded. "Yellow paint. Flecks of old yellow paint on her clothes. Suppose we're looking for a painter?"

The street in front of him began to spin. He held on to stop it, gripping the seat until his knuckles turned white. Yellow paint on a sweater? Oh God, he'd been wearing a sweater last spring

when he tried to paint the house!

Sandy was still in thought, tapping a finger on the steering wheel. "Might have been some other paint too, they weren't sure. But definitely yellow. Buddy, I got a feeling our boy is a professional painter. But where do we look for him in this city?"

His brain was reeling. But then it split and one side became the automatic cop. "We canvass the area where Brenda Peterson worked," he said. "There and her apartment. She didn't go anywhere else, he had to pick her up around one of those places.

"She wouldn't have come to this neighborhood by herself at night. He picked her up there somehow, and brought her here to kill her. This victim the same way. He's crazy, but he's smart."

"That's my boy." Sandy grinned. "Why didn't I come up with that?" He started the engine.

They were wasting time looking for a painter, Mike knew that. Somewhere in one of those cardboard boxes was an old sweater with yellow paint on it. And maybe now a little blood. Or was Killer Randall smart enough to get rid of the evidence too?

Anyhow, he'd play the game out until he could get rid of Sandy tonight and search his own apartment. And if Detective Randall found the killer in that apartment...? Well, he'd cross that bridge when he came to it.

He had another idea when they

reached the neighborhood where Brenda Peterson had lived — to look for freshly painted houses. They found two. Nobody home at the first, bingo at the second. The lady told them who she'd hired and yes, one of the men had worn a sweater. She'd thought it a little odd at the time.

The address the woman gave them turned out to be a house. The painter worked out of his home and his wife told them where to locate him.

"Yeah," he said when they found him. "I got a guy who wears a sweater all the time. I mean I may have. He didn't show up today. Name's Blocker."

"Do you know where he lives, Mister Johnson?" Sandy asked.

The address was in apartments even cheaper than those where Brenda Peterson had lived. He and Sandy opened their coats at the door and slipped the thirty-eights loose in the holsters. Mike knocked.

He knocked again before he got an answer. The man who opened the door and uncombed hair, bloodshot eyes, and wore a sweater with paint on it. He took one look at them, slammed the door again. They could hear running footsteps inside.

"Got the back," he yelled and ran. Behind him, he could hear Sandy's shoulder crash against the door.

He ran down a littered drive beside the building to an alley

behind. Before he reached it, the man ran past, up the alley. He spun the corner and braced himself in a shooting position, gun in one hand, the other gripping his wrist.

"*Halt! Halt or I shoot!*"

The man hesitated, half-turned, trying to make up his mind. There was a short wall a few steps further. Over it and he might have a chance.

"*Don't try it!*" Mike leveled the gun at the man's chest. But could he shoot? Could he shoot down this man for something he had done himself? The seconds were agonizing. *Don't run!* he prayed. *Don't run and make me make this decision, whatever you think you've done!*

He heard Sandy break out the rear of the building and in front of him the man suddenly gave up. He grabbed his head with both hands and slid to his knees. Then he began to sob.

He held his brace until Sandy got by him and took Blocker by the arm to straighten the man and search him for a weapon. Then he brought him back to Mike.

Blocker was shaking and his words were almost incoherent. "I didn't want to do it," he sobbed. "I didn't want to hurt those women. Something made me do it! I was just crazy!"

Through a fog Mike heard himself saying: "You have a right to have a lawyer before you make a statement, Mister Blocker. Any-

thing you say to us now can be used against you."

They took him to the car and Sandy radioed for a cruiser to take him downtown. Afterward, they searched his apartment. The metal pipe was there, wiped clean, but they knew they'd find traces of blood when it got to the lab. And there were papers. Blocker had kept papers, ID and other things from the women's wallets. Why he kept them would be a mystery only that crazy mind could understand.

Mike leaned against a wall and was sick. Sandy gripped his arm. "Mike, what is it? I knew something was wrong with you. You haven't been yourself. What's the matter, partner?"

He laid it all out, stumbling over the words. The buckle, the sweater, all the things that pointed to himself.

Sandy let out a long sigh. "Don't you know what caused that, Mike? Look, I'm no shrink. But I do know you. How many murders have you worked in the last few months?"

He had to think. "Nine. Including these."

"Yeah," Sandy said. "That's a lot of dead bodies. Pretty rough to see them in violent death and then slowly get to know them as people when you investigate their lives backwards. You remember the Moore kid?"

"Yes."

"You punished yourself on that one. Like if you'd gotten there a

few minutes sooner by not making that wrong turn in traffic, that girl would still be alive. You blamed yourself for her death. At that time, I thought I talked you out of it. But I guess I didn't."

"I remember," he said. Remembering.

"Yeah. And about that time Carroll left you. You're blaming yourself for that too. Instead of the simple fact that a lot of women can't stand the strain of being married to a cop."

Sandy smiled and gently shook his head. "Like I said, Mike.

I'm no shrink. But I figure you're carrying a lot of guilt you don't deserve. And you've seen too many murders in the last months.

"If you take my advice, you'll ask for a session with the police psychiatrist and then you'll take a long vacation. Use some of that time you've got coming. You're too good a cop, Mike, to let yourself go off the deep end."

Mike straightened and looked out the window, thinking about what Sandy had just said. Funny, but the sky looked bluer than it had in a long time...



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House Of The Serpents

by ROY MEADOR

When the overlord of an international crime cartel dies, it is kill or be killed for all of his assistants.

"DENNIS PUMA?" The U. S. Customs man examined my passport and its heavy load of stamps with the fussy care of officialdom everywhere. He looked at me with fond hope. Maybe after twenty boring years he finally had a dishonest to goodness interna-

tional spy all his own. He would get his picture on the front of the *Daily News* and be King of Queens two whole days.

"That's my name." I put an edge on it. Fawn on officials and they begin licking their chops like coyotes with fresh red meat.

"Unusual name." His tone backed off.

"My old man was part Indian. We never knew how much."

He searched my briefcase perfunctorily and waved me off, his days of glory still to come. Those electronic snoopers they use at airports may keep him off the front page. Only a political amateur fanatic would try smuggling anything through an airport these days. I didn't relish leaving the Bernardelli .38 behind in Zurich, but one would be waiting in Tucson.

The U. S. like the rest of the world had learned fear during my years away. That was plain at Kennedy, in the law, the radar, the suspicion. The air was full of unspoken questions and fears. I had the feeling I was being watched. But Puma always felt he was being watched. I laughed at myself and walked from the BOAC terminal to American.

I asked the black-haired girl for the best connections to Tucson. She punched her little buttons and waited her little wait. Soon the machine talked back. The gentleman was in luck, it clacked. Because of the holiday, all straight through flights were filled, but I could take the milk run by way of Dallas and Houston with a switch at Houston.

Black-hair made out the tickets with the brisk efficiency typical of her breed. "My old man was part Indian," I said when my name

brought the usual look.

"Oh!"

I took the tickets and turned away, then turned back again. "What holiday?" I asked, handing her my larger bag to check through to Tucson.

"What holiday? *Thanksgiving!*" Black-hair shook like a palo verde tree in moonlight.

I told her I had been out of the country a long time, added, "So they still give thanks. What for?"

She didn't have an answer, but she did let me know her break was coming up. Tough. I was on a rigid leash, and if I dallied even an hour with that look in her eyes, we would land in Manhattan and I wouldn't reach Tucson for a week, maybe a month.

Tamara wouldn't like that. The cable in my pocket wouldn't be patient. I walked away, questioning the ways of men in this world, especially my ways.

On the plane to Texas I read the cable again, admiring Tamara's gift for succinctness. *He thinks he's dying. Please come.*

Not a word wasted, except the *Please*. That didn't sound like Tamara. She had included it for a reason. Tamara always had a reason. I knew that from many times before, including the first time in Florence.

She hadn't wasted words then either. "Not bad," she said of a Botticelli copy I was making at the Uffizi.

We were there for the same

reason. Her cover was playing tourist. Mine, as usual, was playing artist. Only I wasn't playing. I was really trying. Through all the hard years in sad dirty places, I had tried, half-thinking sometimes that the brush was obeying and I was managing stuff with brush and color that seemed to say something. *Merde!* Pretending the hand that held the Bernardelli could also hold a brush was pure *Bullsh* as they say in Australia.

"Not bad," Tamara repeated in the villa at Viareggio, 90 kilometers from Florence, when the Bernardelli helped us do the job that had to be done. Tamara did her part efficiently, ruthlessly, with a little smile.

She kept her little smile when we had sex together later at her hotel in Florence and she said, "Not bad" for the third time that day. Then came sex in hotels from Livorno to Cannes, around the northern, breast-shaped half-moon of the Mediterranean.

Tamara used plush Riviera pads the way fakirs in Calcutta use snakes to lure herself and her partner into a state of false excitement. Even when she gave all the scents and sounds of making it, I had the feeling she wasn't really there. She was on the far edge of danger doing the things that gave her special kicks.

She finally took me to Paris to see Pere for the first time. Even then he was near legendary, and

it was like meeting an institution.

"No time for crap," were his first words to me. He was old, of course, but somehow ageless. You had the feeling everybody had tried and failed to get at him with guns and knives and bombs and laws.

He thinks he's dying. Please come.

On the plane to Texas I remembered that fortress of a house near Paris. He was thin. His eyes burned like X-rays looking for malignancies and finding them. His face was cold as the Antarctic, with an expression any painter would want to try for.

My first crazy impulse was to ask Pere if I could paint him. But Tamara got me out of there before I could say anything screwy. "Pere doesn't play games," she said.

Tamara did. So did I. We played games together, all kinds, with no holds barred as we used to say on the Arizona desert when I was a kid.

Eventually I made a bad mistake with Tamara. I opened up. I told her how I really felt about the work at V, those other games with the Bernardelli.

"You didn't *like* it?" she asked, sitting up. "What do you mean?"

"That it goes a little against the grain. That I wish it wasn't necessary. But Pere says it has to be, so I do it. That's all." It was too much to say and the wrong listener.

I was taken to Pere again. As usual he was surrounded by others, but seemed totally alone.

"My daughter tells me you are not wholeheartedly committed. That is worrisome, Mr. Puma."

"Your daughter?" It was news to me and a minor bombshell.

"I'm afraid we need reassuring, Mr. Puma."

Was she really his daughter or was that Pere's way of talking? I never did learn. Reassurances were more important. I told him the truth. Bluster and bluff would be useless with Pere.

He asked questions. I told him about the slums of south Tucson, the mountains circling the city like sleeping apes. I told him about my old man driving tractors for the copper mines and burning inside at the corrosive word, *half-breed*. I told him about my mother, mean with her own angers and tequila and compulsive stealing.

He learned how I felt at the age of twelve, fifteen years before I faced him in his Paris stronghold. He learned about the painting, my time with the French Army in North Africa, my knack with weapons.

"I heard about you in the Sahara," I said, "Go to Paris they told me. Pere will have a place for you. When my hitch was up, I caught a military flight north. Gradnor took me on and gave me some jobs. I did them. I can still do them."

His eyes were calm as death, but like the blue flame in a welding torch. I took a chance. "You are too smart to concern yourself with the babble of bed. Doing the jobs is what matters."

He said nothing. Just looked at me with those fire eyes out of that frozen face. It was no doubt nerves, but I found myself taking an even bigger chance. "Pere, this is crazy to ask, but would you object if I brought paints in here and did a canvas of you."

The old man laughed, if you want to call it that. It was more like jackals celebrating a hot blood festival. "No time for crap," he said automatically. Then he surprised me and the others by nodding. "Why not, Mr. Puma? Bring your paints."

He said he liked the picture and kept it. Apparently he was reassured I could do something to cure my bilious conscience. I kept on. But not with Tamara. She disappeared, until the cable came with that strange word — *Please*.

If Pere thought he was dying, he probably was. Pere would know. The cable wasn't a complete surprise. I was handling matters at Zurich when word arrived from Gradnor that Pere was sick and shifting to the desert near Tucson. Maybe my talk in our one-way interview was partially behind it. He could choose worse than the Sonoran Desert if he was running from sickness. Or the final long dry spell.

Would the others be there? Gradnor from Paris, Tarmack from Istanbul, Hastings from Hong Kong/Macao, Arenson from Stockholm? Those were the ones I knew. There were others.

Whatever waited in Tucson, I wanted to get there fast, get hold of a Bernardelli from a guy I knew on Ajo Way, persuade my nerves to stop screaming with uncertainty.

II

THE DALLAS-BOUND JET was less than half full. Was that another sign the U.S. had learned about fear? People stayed home, locked their doors, traveled to the moon on television.

The stewardess was standing there with the Jack Daniel's I ordered. We were above the clouds with sun glare through the windows. I knew about the sun. It could decree capital punishment for the sin of neglecting a water bag. It didn't forgive. I pulled the shade and took the sour mash.

"Beef or chicken?" She had Texas in her voice, a healthy mixture of brashness and sweet innocence.

"Beef."

She brought a machine-cooked meal that only a machine should eat. The girls weren't big-busy on that flight. She lingered. "I'm Meg."

"Then the tag on your uniform isn't lying."

Meg wanted to know if I was stopping over in Houston, the end of her run. I put it down to the European look. What else? I had been a dozen years away. Maybe American women had grown desperate with men turning to the *Wall Street Journal* or each other. Maybe I had a forlorn look like a lost prairie dog.

"Have to take right off for Tucson." She was a million years too young. And Tarmack or Hastings might be waiting for me in Tucson, or anywhere along the way. If Pere was choosing an heir, a careful businessman might anticipate some efforts at removing competition.

I had telegraphed Tamara from Kennedy. Would she meet me at the Tucson Airport? Had the years changed her? Did she remember that first Italian bed with loud music from the next room and the "not bad" verdict? Or would Arenson be waiting with a different sort of music?

Houston was one fast sour mash whiskey south of Dallas. Tucson was two sour mashes, one coffee, and one machine-sandwich for a ball-bearing gut beyond Houston.

I saw the Tucson lights as the plane approached. I had no feeling for it. There was no home down there for me. I was a stranger coming to a place of strangers. Some of the mountains looked familiar, shrouded with shadows, like old enemies.

Tamara didn't meet me. No one

met me. I rented an automobile and used the map in the glove compartment to find Ajo Way. I knew Jerry was still in business, because I had contacted him from Zurich. I knew he would have a Bernardelli waiting, because that's what I ordered.

Jerry was older, fatter, dirtier, shrewder, more expensive, but reliable. His rented Bernardelli felt warm in the rented holster against my chest as I drove down Alvernon to Speedway and turned right.

Pere's house was on Sabino Canyon Road. If I knew the old man and how his head worked, the house would be on the side of a mountain, surrounded by desert, with a good view of the road for miles in both directions. Trust Pere to find or build a fortress.

It was November and stars were shouting at one another in the vast sky. I drove fast, ignoring the desert and the night. I had grown up with these alien plants and fractured horizons. They were an old story with an unhappy ending. Saguaro cactuses pointed accusing fingers at the sky. Or maybe they were praying. You couldn't prove it by me then or later.

I passed guest ranches and came to the private road leading to Pere's place. It was another fortress. Age and illness hadn't dulled his instincts for guarding his front and no doubt his back as well.

There was a graveled parking lot east of the house and other cars waiting for mine to join them. They had the same anonymous, impersonal look of rentals. Space remained for more rentals to arrive. Pere was having a party, and I wasn't the only one invited.

"Welcome to Casa Culebra, Mr. Puma."

There were two, and they had done something I didn't think possible, gotten that close without my knowing. Either I was off, way off, or they were that good. Their calm Indian faces blended with the dark. They were young, quiet, patiently wary.

"We'll have to trouble you for weapons, Mr. Puma. His rule."

It was a new rule. I unhooked the shoulder strap and handed over the Bernardelli.

"We'll mother it like it was our own," said the younger Indian, a boy, really, with a half-smile.

I had Jerry's ammo in my bag, and I let them know. The boy had begun whirling the Bernardelli. "That's a sensitive tool," I suggested. His smile turned full, and his hand stopped playing. He took my bag without comment and started toward the house. His companion sided me. There was no sign of Tamara.

The house was old adobe with evidence of recent work, the yard well-gravelled, the plants tended. Order prevailed. The old man hated clutter. The adobe shell had been added-to through the

years. A circular tower topped the roof with gunholes all around, a holdover from another century. Its thick walls spoke of a time when Mescalero and Chiracahua Apaches made life interesting for watchful ranchers and deadly for careless ones.

A century ago the tower would have kept out bullets or arrows. Three hand grenades, I estimated, would bring it down or put its defenders out of action. The place was forbidding in the cold starlight.

"Casa Culebra," I said. "House of serpents. It fits."

"His little joke," said the Indian. He didn't laugh at the little joke, but the younger one did, as he disappeared with my luggage. "Wes is still young enough to be happy. You'll get used to him," my companion murmured from the shadows.

"I don't bother getting used to everything. But young is a problem some people outgrow. What do they call you?"

"Various things, Mr. Puma. Mostly they call me Cat."

He moved like one, soundlessly, as he left me there. I was alone and afraid of the dark, because that was a place where darkness was something to fear. California clouds had moved across to cover the stars. Steps approached, heavy, familiar.

"Tarmac," I said without turning, "Pere must be in a bad way to pull you off your 'wives.'

I use the term loosely."

He was short and chunky and incessantly licking his chubby lips with a wet red tongue, as though on the lookout for live little birds he could munch and swallow, bones, feathers and all. We had done a job together once in Odessa — badly. I figured, without proof, he had made a deal with the other side.

"Puma, you lack a sense of huma," said Tarmac and shook with amusement like vibrating gelatin or a loon gone berserk.

"Don't give yourself a death rattle, Tarmac. Where's Tamara?" His mouth was like the rectum of a hippo. Who could expect speech from such a hole. I started to push past him into the house.

"They're not there, Puma. Just the old man and his snakes. She said make you welcome." There was sneer in his voice. I wondered if lizards would crawl out if I kicked him in the midsection.

"Where are they?"

"She drove Hastings and the others. All except me. I preferred waiting for you, Puma. I thought we could make love while the rats are away." He giggled to the point of slobber, and I might have tried for the lizards, but Cat reappeared with a note from Tamara. It was brief:

Darling,

Hastings knows this chap at Nogales. I'm showing your

colleagues a little of America and Mexico. The tenderest of welcomes to Casa Culebra, darling. Looking forward to renewal of our warm friendship. Say hello to Pere if he's awake.

T.

It was a wild scribble. She wrote as she lived, impatiently. Warmth? Friendship? Did she think she could rattle her bracelet, and I would fall to my knees, panting. Well, *would* I? I half resented the note and its implications.

"Is evil Tamara adding beautiful Puma to her long list? I'll bid higher," I whispered Tarmack. His voice oozed.

Cat was still there, quiet as the mountains. "She told me to look in on Pere if he's awake," I told him, shaking off the fat insect.

"It will be my pleasure to check for you, Mr. Puma." Cat was gone again, quickly, with no noise. He was a silent man with the deadliness of silence. I made it a point not to underrate Cat or the other one, the boy Wes.

"Make her bid high, Puma. She is gluttonous. Brother Hastings, dear man, calls her voracious, insatiable, with a yeasty yearning to eat you up. I blush to repeat, dear boy."

"Insects who become a nuisance get swatted," I said. Why did Pere put up with Tarmack? Why did I?

"My darling Puma," he smirked, "you desert boys are so exciting." I could imagine that smirk holding in place as he pressed a sharp, ornately carved letter opener through my sleeping throat. If Pere kept him around, there was a reason.

Cat beckoned from the house. "He's awake, Mr. Puma. He'll see you."

III

THE HOUSE WAS vast inside with doors opening on doors. I was soon lost as I followed the Indian. Cat reached the wing he was seeking and finally a room with an open door.

Pere was sitting up in a chair. He looked old. He was. But he didn't look dying.

Pere was gazing intently at an enormous glass cage which filled half the room, floor to ceiling. Inside the cage were hundreds of compartments. Each compartment was equipped with a trap door, and an elaborate system of tunnels led to a central arena, an arena of execution.

Each compartment held countless species of desert reptiles and spiders, all very much alive, most of them angry and eager for violence. Tarantulas, gila monsters, rattlesnakes, sidewinders, diamondbacks, Mohave rattlers, coral snakes, lizards, giant centipedes, all venomous and sinister.

Pere didn't bother with me. He concentrated on the theatrical performance at the center of the cage. A sidewinder was trying to cope with thousands of black desert army ants. The ants were streaming down their tunnel in attack. The sidewinder was already in a bad way.

"Size isn't everything," said Pere slowly, "Not always."

"Not with inexhaustible numbers on your side."

"Precisely, Mr. Puma. My beauties like you. They offer you the salute of the fang." He was right. Countless fangs were pointed in my direction.

"Your beauties seem to offer me the tribute of hunger, hatred and the urge to kill," I said.

Pere faced around. His eyes were still coals from hell in a frozen face. "Thank you for coming promptly, Mr. Puma. Please sit down. My beauties become nervous when strangers stand in their presence. Do you hold with those who consider reptiles our nearest and closest ties with the divine mysteries, Mr. Puma?"

I didn't know whether to laugh or run. I did neither. "The subject hasn't popped up often enough for me to decide."

"Since coming to your desert, Mr. Puma, I have become intrigued by the special wisdoms of the people and creatures here. They seem in touch with the eternal. We can think of the desert

as eternal by ordinary human terms, can we not, Mr. Puma?"

"I don't see why not." His words were neither wandering nor crazy, but they were far removed from Pere's normal concerns. I was disturbed.

"Precisely, Mr. Puma. The desert has no time for crap. It gets down to fundamentals, the basics of life and death. Like my beauties."

Was I listening to the ramblings of an old man scared witless about kicking the bucket without a credit card or guards to protect him out there? Or had Pere gone mad?

The sidewinder was down. The ants covered it like a winter blanket snuggling a sleeper. I shuddered.

"I recall our discussion, Mr. Puma. You were concerned then with a certain squeamishness. I think we concluded that you could manage it. Do my beauties distress you?"

"Your beauties damn near drive me up the wall!"

Pere smiled slightly as he surveyed his kingdom of reptiles. After a long silence, he said, "Your frankness is still an asset, Mr. Puma. Pray do not lose it. Remember we have no time for crap, Mr. Puma. You will learn soon what is needed. I trust you will be amused. Think about my question and next time try to give me your answer. Good night."

What question? That stuff about

snakes and divine mysteries? It was like icepicks through the brain, melting as they entered.

"I'll show you to your quarters, Mr. Puma." I followed Cat obediently, glad to get out of there.

"How long has he had snakes?"

"They were here when I came."

"How long has he been like this?" It wasn't a question for the hired hands, but Pere had told me frankness was an asset.

"When I came he was as he is now. I know he is concerned with big thoughts and hopes for answers from the desert. Here is your room, Mr. Puma."

My luggage was open on a table. It had been neatly rifled. The room was large with high ceilings. A small balcony faced east. The bed was large. Clean sheets were neatly turned down.

A bureau had absolutely nothing in it or on it. The room was totally free of left-behinds from previous occupants, if any. No last-year newspapers lined the drawers. Only the walls were incongruous. Instead of paint, the usual thing in adobe houses, the walls were papered with bright flowers, laughing clowns, and bouncy elephants. Tamara's little joke?

I was a long way from Zurich and too tired for bouncy elephants. I turned in, and the next thing I knew, I was dreaming about feeling something soft, warm, mushy and moist. It was like thrusting

a fist inside a burst tomato, opened by the sun's heat. In the dream I was caressing fleshy flowers.

"Such a nice way to renew acquaintance." She applied pressure against my hand with whatever part of her I was exploring.

"What the hell, I was dreaming about flowers."

"You found one, darling," said Tamara. I couldn't see her, but I could feel her. All of her. I pulled away. There were questions to ask, answers to get.

"Later, Puma," she said impatiently, "in the morning."

I woke up alone. And tireder than when I went to bed. Welcome home, Puma.

IV

THE AFTERNOON SUN was trying to set the world ablaze, but an overhead sprinkler system made the arbor behind the house bearably cool. That was where we met. It was like Old Boys' Day at the Devil's Island stockade.

Chairs were arranged. They had folding arms in case we wanted to take notes. Wes, our smiling bartender, dispensed drinks to order. "Jack Daniel's and ice," I said.

"You betcha, Mr. Puma, pronto."

We moved about hesitantly, suspiciously shaking hands. Men were present who had considered

having me killed, and men whom I had paid the same compliment. There were men I had done jobs with, slept beside in hard places, struggled with to find a balance between trust and distrust.

We were Pere's people. We were there because Pere wanted us there. We talked little. There was little to say. I didn't know about their operations. They didn't know about mine.

Cat moved among us unobtrusively with the manner of a dutiful houseboy. He was alert, taking mental notes. But he was an amateur in this jungle. Nothing would be heard worth remembering. Nothing would be said worth repeating.

Hastings elbowed his way to my side and began a long harangue about Eastern currencies and their effect on a casino in Kowloon where he had interests.

"I daresay you've never gambled where the croupiers are naked young Filipinos, Puma, both girls and lads. My idea. Working brilliantly. We tried other nationalities, but the Flips offer just the right proportion of cheer, deference and silliness. Drop in, Puma, if you ever get things running smoothly in your place."

I nodded occasionally without listening. Tamara hadn't showed. She had promised a question and answer session, but I hadn't seen her since arriving. I had merely slept with her.

Hastings droned on, too lavish with the Oxford tones and manners. I happened to know he had spent his youth scratching for halfpennies on the Liverpool dock, and his only university was a Borstal prison for boys at Leicester. Let him pretend, another of the world's genial chumps. Maybe we are all chumps.

Hastings was seven or eight years my senior, but still one of Pere's youngest insiders. He was something of a phony, but what else is new. I rather liked the guy. At least he was easier to tolerate than the others, the Tarmacks who made sliminess an art, the Gradnors who were nothing but ruthless ambition.

I saw Gradnor and left Hastings with an abrupt, "Yeh, I'll have to check out that casino."

"No one is more naked than a naked, Filipino," Hastings called after me in a thick, upper-British accent. The effect was laugh-provoking.

"Share the funny, *mon petit inferieur*," said Pere's number two. The general consensus was that Gradnor was too impetuous in the brawn and too limited in the brain department ever to be more than number two. He thought he was more, a lot more, than he was. Ambition without substance was Gradnor's problem. I knew I had more of what it would take to occupy Pere's sandals. No doubt the others thought the

same throughout our little band of snarling, back-stabbing brothers.

I was Gradnor's protege. He had brought me in and was still condescending, though in power and duties we were at least equals. Tamara's arrival gave me no time to pick whatever brains I could locate in the Number Two.

Out she came, brisk, beautiful, efficiency incarnate. She didn't give me a glance, though a few hours earlier she had been naked in my arms and meowing her little cries. She wore tight maroon shorts and a bikini top to harness, after a fashion, her full breasts. The years had done nothing to reduce her beauty or slow her down. As always, she was ready for anything, a humping romp or a touchy job with bullets for pay.

"If you gentlemen will pick chairs," said Tamara, "I'll hand out these papers and we can start. Be your darling self, Cat; and bring us a drink." She took a chair near the front as the rest of us scrambled for chairs. It was no accident I sat next to Gradnor. It seemed good business to let him think he could rely on me. I might need Gradnor.

Tamara sipped from the drink Cat gave her and made a face as if to say it was much too strong for a sensitive little girl. There was laughter, including mine. When it came to using people, no talents surpassed those of a beautiful woman.

When we were seated, Tamara handed out the papers, leaning over each desk with calculated tease. Hastings reached out to tweak her lovely paps. She slapped his hand.

"Mustn't touch, Your Naughtiness." More laughs. I felt a little sick, and then sicker at feeling sick.

Her beauty was something untoouchable. I thought of the book by that Irishman Wilde, the picture that showed corruption and evil while the man in the picture stayed young. Was there such a picture of Tamara somewhere inside Casa Culebra, showing the decadence of her life while she stood here, a golden desert virgin, a vessel of love, forever ready?

When she reached Tarmac, he hoisted his piglike bulk and whispered an obscenity all of us were meant to hear.

"Cute idea, Porky. But when girls start thinking you're the answer to their maiden prayers, the gods will razorblade their wrists."

For me she had no expression. Her eyes said nothing. My hands trembled as I took the papers.

"Mustn't be chummy with mummy," she told the black man from Quelimane when he leaned forward in his turn. Finally it was done. The papers were distributed and Tamara rested her maroon bottom. "All right, Cat," she said, "Tell him."

There was a loudspeaker fixed to the house, and our chairs faced it. Our situation reminded me of an ugly schoolroom among the adobe slums of South Tucson. The female Anglo teacher, always clean, would tell us to rest our heads for a one-minute prayer.

Then we'd stand and pledge allegiance to the United States of America. In South Tucson we didn't know what was meant by the United States of America. As for praying, that was priest business. In those slums we weren't dumb enough to think any snowbird tourist gods would stop where we were thirty seconds.

Pere's backyard was a long way from that hot schoolroom. The setting had cost Pere at least a million. I was surrounded by men who respected me enough to want me dead. You've traveled far, Puma, I told myself.

A vulture crossed the desert nearby. Appropriate party crasher. The birds of carrion appetite were missing from Pere's glass kingdom, but they were present for our international convention. Overhead I could hear water trickling through the coiled plants. Running water is a good sound in deserts. It's the sound of nature making love with herself.

Pere applied the Machiavellian principle of making us wait. As one who had spent the previous night looking at snakes and having sex with the boss's daughter, I dozed off. A half-dream started.

I was reaching for Tamara, and she was changing into a grisly, laughing portrait in hot, garish colors.

I woke with a start, but made no sign. Each of us was being watched, and each of us was watching the others. Malevolent vigilance was the business of the hour. Tamara was there, her legs crossed, her long fingers meshed beneath her breasts. I caught Tarmack's stare, brooding with hate and lust. Given the chance, he would wear my privates as a necklace or carry them, dried and stuffed, as lucky charms.

Pere's voice crackled from the speaker: "No time for crap. I have called you here to help me die." Then a high pitched laugh in a heavy fret of static. It had a manic quality. We joined in nervously.

"No time for crap," he repeated, "You're here to help me die."

V

HELP HIM DIE? I thought what some of the others must have thought, that Pere was dead already. The mind that had kept him on top had gone backpacking into the hills.

Pere talked. Some of it sounded like recorded speech played backwards. Parts made sense. Much of it was incoherent babble. The gist was something like this...

"Look about. The desert teaches lessons of life and death. It teaches us to cope with weakness. Beware of that organ they call the heart. It is capable of treacheries. The desert teaches discipline to the heart. I am old and know what I know. The desert insists on respect for the divine mysteries. Ask my beauties, gentlemen, consult them for the wisdom of the fang.

"Soon I begin my journey. So now it is necessary to play the Game of the Succession. Alexander's generals killed each other like death birds, and his empire was lost. I do not make the mistakes of history. The Game of the Succession is our solution."

That was the sort of stuff. It went on a long time. It probably seemed longer than it really was. Pere expected us to play a little competitive game of kill or be killed for his entertainment and, incidentally, to determine the succession.

"You are honored in being invited to play the Game. This means your rank and your merits are high. Some, of course, will not survive the Game of the Succession. Think of that positively, in terms of the desert that lives with death forever. My beauties do not shy from death. Learn from their wisdom. Remember only the succession is important."

The Game was like something dreamed up at a conference of reptiles by an old man scared of

dying who had swallowed one spoonful too much of desert lore. He talked about the Indian manhood test of sending a boy alone and weaponless into the desert for three days and nights. The challenge — to stay alive.

Pere even threw in a Biblical story for seasoning. About the sheik who gave money to three servants and judged them on how much they brought back. It was easy to see the sort of game he had in mind. Pere was loony, but there was method in his looniness.

Nobody protested. Nobody had the nerve. A crazy old man spoke. We listened and in due course would kill ourselves playing out a foolish desert parable of life and death, with Pere and his beauties watching.

The old man went on and on. Obviously there was more time for crap than any of us were willing to state publicly. As Pere talked I skimmed the papers Tamara had distributed. There was a road map of the Tucson area, including the Catalina, Rincon, Coronado, and Tucson Mountains. Another page had this caption — RULES & PRINCIPLES OF THE GAME OF THE SUCCESSION.

I began reading and wondered if this was an asylum to which all of us had been committed by the authorities. Atelli, from Milano, was ahead of me, softly humming an aria from Rigoletto. I mentioned the fact later, and Atelli denied it. He wasn't even aware.

He was scared to death with music for a shield.

Here's what the rule sheet had to say:

1. *Each must participate or leave the service of Pere.*
2. *Scientific evaluations will be made of each participant's physical well-being. These evaluations will determine how far into the desert the participant is taken. Those with health and youth advantages will in fairness have the greatest distance to confront.*
3. *Each participant will have a map. No other materials, including clothes, may be carried.*
4. *Each participant will remain away precisely three days. Accepting gifts from others is not allowed. If such acceptance occurs, appropriate measures may be taken.*
5. *Each participant may take what he wishes from others. The rule of the desert and the game is survival.*
6. *The participant must return to Casa Culebra in precisely three days. He must offer as tribute the carcass of a poisonous creature he has personally executed.*
7. *It is requested that only one person reappear.*

Those were the RULES. These

were the PRINCIPLES OF THE GAME OF SUCCESSION.

1. *The desert teaches wisdom. Imitate the reptile.*
2. *The divine mysteries are not concerned about small events. Survival is the only large event.*
3. *The Game commences exactly one week from the afternoon of this introduction.*
4. *Questions may not be asked. Speculations about Pere's sanity are irrelevant and impertinent. Appropriate measures may be taken.*
5. *Only Pere knows what is necessary in the successor.*
6. *In accord with the classic rule of life, it must be determined by the formula of every man versus every man.*
7. *It is inadvisable for more than one to return. The decision of the judges will be final. May the best man win.*

The whole thing was at once tragic and hilarious. The rules and principles sounded as if they had been dictated by his beauties. In a pathological way, they may even have been practical. Spending three days naked in the desert would surely prove something or other. The last rule and the last principle, that only one of us should return, would prove more.

Once in the desert, we could take off, of course. But my hunch

was we would think it through, weigh dangers versus benefits, and find it impossible to run. There was too much to lose. And I had no illusions Pere was going to allow any of us to drop out. "Leave the service of Pere" was a synonym for "slab."

I wondered what Gradnor was thinking. The permanent number two, he had expected to move up as a matter of seniority. Now he had to survive in unknown terrain and eliminate the rest of us. It was like waiting in bed for Tamara and having Pere's beauties appear instead.

Or was Gradnor delighted? Were the others delighted, each convinced he could bring it off? Their faces said nothing. Cat and Wes stood motionless at the side, staring skyward where the vulture flew earlier.

Pere finally emerged from his swamp of crocodile words.

"There is no time for crap. Let the divine mysteries decide." Then silence.

Any hopes I had that the old man was responsible were gone. Was it age, people or snake venom that had changed him from the hard but sensible Pere into this murky zealot with a fanatic's scheme? Finding out would take research, but not by me. I would be naked in the desert with a map of Tucson and four vulnerable weapons — two hands, two feet.

"What do you think?" I asked Gradnor. "It's crazy!" was the

answer I wanted.

What he said was, "Trust Pere to find a new solution for a difficult task." He was afraid. And more afraid to admit it.

Tarmack looked gleeful. "Congratulations, Puma. We'll make love, after I kill you."

I hurried past him. I had to catch Tamara before she disappeared inside the house among the snakes and shadows. I caught her arm. "You promised talk."

She opened her mouth to blast me with contempt, then stopped. I could see the maneuvers inside her head, marching regiments of nasty thoughts. Her instincts wanted to shoot me down for the simple pleasure of public derision. A very different idea took over.

"Come along, Puma, be chummy with mummy." She knew the way to my room better than I did. Inside she cracked the maroon shorts and bikini halter revealing a deep golden tan on every creamy part.

"Cover yourself," I said, throwing the bedspread at her. "I want to know about this." Her eyes were hard as arrowheads and twice as sharp.

"What is this succession nonsense? You know it's crazy."

With a sudden pout in her voice and manner she said, "It isn't nice to talk that way. Pere knows what is needed."

"It isn't nice! We're sent barebottom silly into the desert

to play out some coyote charade. We kill each other off until only one's alive. And it isn't nice to ask questions!"

"The answer is simple, darling. Let it be you. That would make it all right."

The irony was, she meant it. Winning made anything all right.

"Pere listens to you, Tamara. You have to make him call off this project. It won't pick a successor. It will destroy all of us."

"Darling, it isn't nice to talk that way." Her fingers were intimately exploring, and my feeble mind rationalized that it wouldn't start for a week. My hands didn't need orders to touch her hair, or the soft spaces along her vertebrae, her sticky lips, her pink tongue.

Later, reflectively, I said, "I don't like it. But I think I love you."

She laughed, and the sound was unpleasant, but it didn't matter. I did love her in that I was beginning to want her all the time. Not just minutes and hours, but days, years. Facts were what I needed from her — but sex was what I was getting and increasingly all I wanted.

"I don't mind if you love me, little Puma. That's the reason for men, to see Tamara, to love Tamara." She meant it. And I was fresh out of arguments. My questions were not asked. They probably never would be asked of Tamara.

That evening at Casa Culebra was a fluid orgy. No one mentioned the game. We worked at forgetting it. Vague, sinister fraternities of the moment took shape. Cat and Wes silently provided the drinks. We drank and shared again the seedy triumphs of bygone projects. Utter foolishness. Liquor washed away barricades, sour mash stupors made us comrades. I taught the black man from Mozambique the porno version of "My Darling Clementine."

Barely ambulatory, I finally stumbled to my room and fell across the bed. Then I was vaguely aware of being slapped viciously across the face by a woman questioning my manhood. She resembled Tamara, but may have been Pocahontas or Little Miss Muffet. I wasn't curious.

"Let me sleep!"

"Sleep then, simpleton. You know nothing. You will learn nothing. And when you stop, the world will never even remember that you were around."

Surely Little Miss Muffet wouldn't talk that way. I didn't hear her leave, but I was glad she did. I slept until the sun stabbed through the windows, and I woke thinking of the game.

I made myself get up despite a head filled with old concrete. There were important things I had to do to give myself a surer chance of winning.

VI

I RATTLED THE DICE, blew on them, and let fly. They hit the backboard high and ricocheted half the table length.

"Seven, the winner." The bored Mexican in charge repeated the words perfunctorily and paid the winners. There were quite a few, all riding my play. It was my eighth straight pass.

People, mostly Yankee tourists, crowded in, drunk on the fevers of hope. Even with minor stakes, the tensions are strong. Dice coming out. Life coming out. A natural, a hot seven, a win! Or snake eyes? Snake eyes from Pere's glass cage staring through a dozen tropical eternities.

No time for crap? I was taking time. I was winning. The table had lost thousands. But the Mexican was unconcerned. He knew, eventually the table always won. Every shooter sooner or later crapped out. Why sweat?

Vaya con Dios señor from the impatient north. I was bored, too, in spite of winning. Winning and losing were part of the same scheme, running in circles, with the inevitable crap out up ahead.

The casino was an impressive Mexican layout south of Nogales, close to the main highway. Hastings' friend in Nogales gave us cards of identification. Atelli and the black man were also along. The casino would help us finish another day. It was the fifth, two to go. Five and two made the

big Seven!

Gambling was another means of getting away, better perhaps than continuing our five-day binge. Eight passes, let's try for nine. How much, *señor*? Let it all ride, *señor*!

"Eleven. Pay the winner."

Apathetically the dice were returned and the winners paid again.

"Come on, lover, come on," said a Stateside schoolteacher type at my elbow. She was playing the win line with white chips. Mine were gold, each worth five hundred pesos. "Come on, lover," she repeated, addressing the fates.

She was thirtyish, black hair to the shoulders, minimum makeup in the mod tradition. I liked her face. That doesn't happen often. I'd seen too many faces and discovered the lies behind them. She seemed inexperienced, untouched. That impression was easily faked, of course, but I liked her face. "Come on, lover."

I lowered the dice, earning a loud sigh from the mob of bettors and watchers. Then dice in hand, I leaned across to the girl, "If you really mean it, *ma petite*, you say where."

"My goodness!" she murmured, and actually blushed. Those were her words, no bullsh. Then she spoke indignantly, "If you don't intend to play, I should imagine the man would be grateful if you would give the dice

to another player."

I let them fly. They hit and came back. Sigh became roar, and I knew without looking. "Seven. Pay the winner."

She took her chips and moved away. "Come back, lover," I said softly.

She turned sufficiently for another look, suspicious, but not enough. I could see it bothered her to be driven away by a mere male. It was a public place. She had a right to be there. She stepped back to the table, but downwind from me.

"Stick around," I said, ignoring the crowd. "You're obviously my Lady Luck." She tried not to smile, but did.

"Blow on the dice, Lady Luck," I said, holding them out to her. She hesitated, then blew. It was a healthy gust of wind, warming my fingers. I let the dice go.

"Nine, the point is nine." Then six. Another six. Eight.

"Again, Lady Luck. Teach these cats how to find their nine magic lives."

She blew on them and the dice came up with a six and a three. I didn't know why, but I felt more alive. Craps was a racket for suckers, but I was beginning to taste the excitement of the dice. Or the girl.

Hastings touched my shoulder. "Come along, old boy. The consensus is to explore Nogales for a bit of mischief." Atelli and the black man were behind him.

"I have a streak going," I said.

"Suit yourself, Puma. We'll see you at Casa Culebra, assuming you find a way back. Cheery-bye. Wait...perhaps we can have some lovely mischief right here." His eyes were on Lady Luck.

Hastings spoke to her directly, "I'm Winston Churchill, the Fourth. I should deem it a rare honor if you would accompany us immediately. You may, if you please, bring young Puma along."

She stared him down. Hastings shrugged. "Take your time, young Puma. I shall console the impetuous Tamara."

"Do that, old boy." When Tamara was in arm's reach, I couldn't resist her. But away from Casa Culebra, the magnetism was gone. Perhaps the beautiful Tamara didn't travel well.

When they were gone, I concentrated on the table. But my mood was changed. Mention of the snake house had killed the exhilaration.

"Come on, lover," said the girl, indicating her willingness to repeat the Lady Luck ritual. But it was too late. The next throw showed the reptile eyes, black and still and forever cold. I turned my back on them, forgetting the girl, the lost pesos. I remembered the days ahead, our game of death in the desert.

I hadn't expected her to follow. "Winston Churchill the Fourth came along, spoke to you, and you changed visibly. It was the eeriest

thing. I knew we were going to lose on the next throw." She matched her stride to mine.

"You should have grabbed your chips," I said.

"No — one has to play through to a natural end. I'm not blaming you for losing. You won for me all those times before. They count, too."

Her first words circled my head like a needle caught in a record. "One has to pay through to a natural end." I recited them aloud.

"Certainly. — At least I do. I can't quit, not ever, until I can tell myself, all right, it's ended. That's why I followed. You left so abruptly, so defeated, and it had nothing to do with the dice. I knew it wasn't a natural end for us. I wouldn't mind a drink."

The bar wasn't much. Management saw no reason to encourage sitting. She surprised me by ordering tequila and managing it well, lemon peel and all.

"Dennis Puma," I said as the waiter left. She smiled. "My old man was a half-breed," I added, almost defensively. That was odd. For years I had been indifferent about other people's reactions to the gallon or two of Indian blood sloshing around inside.

"I didn't intend to ask. Names aren't people. They're just labels."

"Do you have a label, or do friends just call you Lady Luck?"

"Only strangers I pick up in

casinos. Others call me Edith Winslow."

"To me you're Lady Luck, or LL for short."

A group at the next table were too loud. I mentioned this politely in Spanish, which amused them and brought a husky Mexican to our table. He proceeded to tell me at some length that American gringos were not dukes and duchesses in his country, et cetera and so forth. He was eloquent, and I wasn't the least irritated.

But I stood up, caught his arm and displayed a casual trick I had learned in North Africa. He landed on the floor, amazed, and slightly sobered. "Behave," I said, "And be glad your arm isn't broken."

He was burly and could have snapped me in half. He laughed, and so did his friends. They insisted on buying us a drink. Camaraderie developed. They made as much or more noise than before, but it was all right because we had joined the family. People, as wise men have noted, are screwballs.

I had behaved witlessly just to do the Tarzan act for Edith Winslow. Highly unprofessional, with catastrophe for Puma's supper if the Mexican had proved nasty. Yet somehow I felt all right about it as she gave me her smile and let me take her hand, like kids at a soda fountain.

I asked her no personal ques-

tions and changed the subject the few times she tried. For me a name, rank and serial number relationship had become a way of life, and a way of staying alive. I told her I worked in Europe and was visiting America for a little business and to meet Lady Luck. But she knew more than I told her.

"Casa Culebra. I heard the man mention it. What does it mean?"

I said I was staying there and gave her the translation — house of serpents. She didn't shudder, just wrinkled her nose in distaste. It was time to go, but I didn't know where or how.

"I'd like to get out of here," I said, "Find some place. With you."

She slowly lifted her eyes. She murmured something. The place was noisy but I heard. "I want that, too."

"My friends left me afoot. Do you happen to have wheels?"

"I happen."

She did happen. I drove north and Lady Luck rested her head on my shoulder. "Find a place," she said. I found a place, and together we saw the moon set and the sun rise. We didn't need the Alps or the Riviera or a room with bouncy elephants at Casa Culebra. With the right stranger, any place will do.

VII

SHE GAZED STRAIGHT ahead as I parked her car on a Tucson side

street, just off the Freeway near Congress. Her FM was playing a Rachmaninoff piano concerto from the university station. I didn't pay attention. Things were on my mind. She was on my mind.

It was time to say goodbye. We had been good together, and it was time to say goodbye. Why say it? Why go back to Pere, his beauties and his game. Back to Tamara and her tidal wave pad. Why, Puma?

Maybe she had said it: You have to play through to a natural end.

"You're special, Lady Luck," I told her when the car stopped. "Thanks for coming along and taking my head out of a long noose." Her head turned onto my shoulder. She made no sound, but I felt she was crying. Tears for Puma? What an amazing thing. "Come on. Come on, my brown-eyed Lady Luck."

She sat up, looked at me hard, said what I thought but couldn't say, "I don't think this is the end of us. I know something is driving you. I haven't asked. I won't. I know you're going to walk away without telling me where you are going, without asking where I live or work. I know all of that."

"Those men last night, the house of snakes, someone named Tamara, Pere. You mentioned Pere before dawn. You sounded afraid, Dennis Puma. I wanted to put my arms around you in protection. I know you're going

back to whatever and wherever it is. But this isn't the natural end for us. It can't be. I won't accept that."

She said it all. The whole truth and nothing but the truth. So I kissed her and walked away.

"I work at Kitt Peak," she said after me, "Kitt Peak, the solar observatory, Puma."

I didn't look back. If I had looked back, I'd have stayed with her whatever the consequences. It would have meant trouble for her and worse trouble for me, and it wouldn't have mattered.

So I didn't look back. I looked ahead. One more day and then the game. I was in no hurry for Casa Culebra. I rented a car and drove to the neighborhood where I first learned to ignore insults and dodge fists. South Tucson, Dennis Puma's home town, welcome conquering her.

The same squat adobe houses were baking in the sun. The same Indian and Mexican women slept in chairs on porches. The same kids rolled in the desert dirt. Maybe one of them was Dennis Puma, old at eight, with a king-size gripe and a king-size appetite.

The neighborhood gave me nothing. The house we survived in was there, and people like us occupied it. Good luck to them. I had no people. I had worked at the business of having no people. And I had made myself walk away from Lady Luck. I was alone.

The game would remedy that.

Plenty of fine companions would join me on the desert. Each would try to see I never felt lonely again, that I never felt anything again.

I drove to the top of a mountain, sat on a rock, and looked at the city below. "A" for asinine. There was nowhere to go. I sat on the rock for hours. It was my throne, and I was monarch of nothing.

So I took the road back to the house of serpents. It was the day before the big game. I should help the others light victory bonfires, join their pep rallies, give out with the rah-team-rahs.

Something of the sort was going on. They were laughing, stumbling, shouting. And all were buck naked, practicing for the game with a cheerful, drunken session of grab-ass.

"Off with the clothes, young Puma," shouted Hastings. "Rare fun, old boy."

It was a yard full of international shady business executives gone totally bonkers. Why not? When at home do as the home folks do. I began stripping for the game.

"That's the way, Puma! It's rare fun." She was on the porch, dressed in her maroon shorts and bikini halter, den mother and overseer of the silliness. Cat and Wes were behind her, fully dressed, calmly watching. She looked at me stripped and in the dirt. It was too much for her.

"Follow me, Puma," she ordered and ran inside the house, fingers working at her zipper.

I didn't follow. The Indians watched me. With contempt? Or just my own contempt reflected? I began dressing again. She reappeared, her halter dangling, angry. She was beautiful, but I didn't want her. I would never want her again. Someone else had filled the vacuum. There was no room for Tamara.

"*Hastings!*"

The Englishman moved quickly. "Sorry, young Puma, but all's fair as they say. No doubt the little tourist proved to be a rewarding voyage. Coming, my dear."

"*Hastings!*" His bare rump reflected sunlight as he leaped through the door. "What tourist?" I heard her ask. I was glad he didn't know her name.

"I'll defile you, Puma darling," said Tarmack behind me, "after I kill you."

I went upstairs to my room, sat on the floor of the balcony, my face to the sun. It was fiercely hot for November. Maybe the sun could burn the scabs off my soul. The uproar of bedlam rose from the ground below. I fell asleep and woke with the sun gone and remoter suns spelling their indifference across the dark.

It was past midnight, with a tired world monotonously spinning around to another dawn. I hadn't drunk a thing. Still I had a lousy hangover and a sour taste and all my hard-earned scabs. It was the day at last, the day of the big game. *Rah-team-rah!*

VIII

I WAS ALONE in an emptiness that would have felt at home on the far side of Saturn. Night was approaching fast with typical desert cold. When the sun is overhead, you burn. When it migrates to other longitudes, you freeze. I had no clothes. I was on a seemingly abandoned mountain road, climbing.

I had a map, useless in the twilight, and perhaps useless in daylight because I had no real idea where I was, except somewhere in the Sonoran desert of North America. Tucson would be somewhere near, and Casa Culebra. Also somewhere in the darkness were other then in my circumstances, playing a game, each with an urge to win.

Winning was easy to define. It simply meant surviving. The first law of survival in the desert night is finding protection against the chill. It was as if I were the first man, alone and lost, on a new planet. My nakedness made me vulnerable in ways I hadn't known before. Romping bare-assed about the bedchambers of the Old World with complacent ladies was no preparation for the exposure Pere had devised.

Maddest truth of all — I was enjoying myself! This weird human-reptile experiment had caught my fancy. The competition was intriguing, and I wanted to

win. A lunatic cheerfulness had been growing since Tamara blindfolded us and we were loaded in the touring van. Cat and Wes took us to our various drops in high style.

I was content to be where I was, despite the terror inside that rose and fell and rose again. Not terror of the night or the cold — terror of Tamara's voice as she tied my blindfold and whispered in exact mimicry, "I love you, darling." Edith Winslow's words and voice.

"You're wanted on the telephone, Mr. Puma. She says it is important." That was how the day had begun, Cat entering without knocking, delivering his message. I was afraid to refuse the call and afraid to take it. The phone was downstairs. None of the others were about, and Cat performed his speciality of disappearing.

"Dennis? Darling, it is you!"

I heard relief and other things I would have given much to hear if the world had been different. If I had been different. If...

"You shouldn't have tracked me down. Shouldn't have called."

You're an innocent in a time of spiders. That was what I wanted her to hear and run for cover.

"Dennis," she said, "I love you, darling." Her voice and those words reached me on the farther side of Saturn. They would reach me wherever I traveled, however deep they buried me. And they would reach me with terror,

because Tamara had repeated them with obscene precision.

"You shouldn't have called." That was the best Puma could manage.

"Please call me at the observatory, Dennis. Better still, visit. I'll introduce you to the sun through the world's largest solar telescope. I'll introduce the man I love to my favorite star."

She said too much, and I listened too long. I should have hung up, but I needed Lady Luck's transfusion.

Eventually I got it said. "You don't know this place or me. Forget us. You were a kid on holiday, subject to starburn. Rub grease on the sore spots. Don't call again. *Adios, Lady Luck.*"

The phone obviously had been hooked to a recorder, and the recorder hooked to Tamara. Enough had been said to make Edith Winslow simple to locate if Tamara chose to bother. I should have strangled her.

The others would have observed indifferently without interfering. Hastings would have jested good-naturedly about wasting a remarkable talent for beddy-bye. But I didn't strangle her, or say a thing when she translated Edith's words into her special vein of sarcastic filth.

I said nothing. I did nothing. I accepted the blindfold and was led naked to the van. The loud-speaker gave us Pere's sendoff: "Go, go, my beauties. Play the

game of the divine mysteries. Test yourselves against the ultimates and each other. Go, go, my beauties."

To Pere we were now part of his snake collection. "Come back to me, all my wonderful lovers," Tamara called with chilling laughter in her voice. We didn't talk in the van. Talk was finished. The game was starting. Each of us was committed now to Pere's lunatic climax of violence.

I meant to win. There was no other way to guard Lady Luck from Tamara. Probably Tamara would do nothing, considering Edith too unimportant. But I couldn't count on that. I would win, and then I would make certain things certain. Crazy or not, I would enjoy the winning.

As the dropoffs began, despite fear for Edith and dread of what Tamara might do, I was close to what might be called pleasure. A sickness that might be called merriment.

The dropoff ritual was complicated. I tried to figure the pattern but failed. At intervals, Cat stopped and Wes helped one of us off. The first to leave was Tarmac. As each left, he received his Tucson map from Cat and a taunting, "Good luck," from Wes.

Finally no one was left except the two Indians and myself. "This is quite a compliment, Mr. Puma," said Cat, "We were directed to take you farthest of all."

It was a compliment, and in a perverse way I was pleased. Also intrigued. Being last and farthest out was graduating *Summa cum Laude*. *This one will be toughest to kill* was their testimonial to Puma. Thanks for the compliment, one and all.

The others had griped about my special advantage, since I was a desert brat. Thus, all the dice with nothing but snake eyes were loaded against me. And I was frankly curious about how I would do it, because I had decided to win.

I suspected from the time elapsed and the speed of the van that I was out at least a hundred miles. The challenge whetted the old Puma appetite. Viewed objectively every sport of man is foolish — but man has an instinct for sport, the more foolish the better. I could feel it coming to life.

"Good luck," said Wes, his voice sardonic, as my bare feet touched the warm but cooling desert. I removed the mask as the van pulled away in a churning wake of dust. The road was unpaved. Most drops had been in such isolated, unpaved places. Passing cars could be commandeered to defeat Pere's purpose. First he wanted his beauties to do a little suffering, a little freezing, a little sweating, a lot of fearing.

As the night thickened and cooled, for me, freezing would likely be first. I was in a mountain

area. The Catalinas? Probably not, too close to Casa Culebra? The Rincons then or the Tucsonos.

Mountains were more dangerous than the desert. Wild animals, including wolves and big cats, would be my companions in the mountains. If one attacked, or more than one, I had only my hands for weapons, plus the map of Tucson. Maybe I could ask a snarling lobo to sniff out the nearest road back to town on the map.

Protection for the night? The spiny and needle-sharp plants of the desert mountains provided neither branches nor leaves. A human habitation or a passing car, if I could reach a road, were my likeliest answers.

If I could stop a car, what then? "Sir, because of the cold, and because you are protected by the car, I must take your pants."

Basic characters, like Tarmack, Arenson or Gradnor, would no doubt feign death or exhaustion, and then efficiently dispose of anyone who approached them. They would kill without compunction and take what they wanted. Faced by the necessity of staying alive, would I do the same?

I had to reach Casa Culebra not in three days, but quickly as possible. Tamara's provocative words made that essential. Edith Winslow, working at her Kitt Peak observatory, had no protection except me. She wasn't even guarded by her own fear.

She couldn't know what it meant, loving one of Pere's men and saying so. That had removed her from the comfortable ranks of the anonymous, brought her to the attention of Tamara, an international expert in malicious mischief.

The grade of the mountain road steepened, became smoother, easier walking. Rocks and pebbles had been washed away by flash floods after desert rains. I walked uphill. The road was primitive, little if any used, but it had to lead somewhere.

I thought of Pere and his glass menagerie. As he watched the twists and turns of serpents in their death combats, he would remember his other beauties playing this Game of Succession in the night.

The moon appeared, cream pale and melancholy. The moon, with a girl in your arms, is warm to view. Naked on a mountain, with wild things waiting in the dark, the moon is just another dead chunk of cold.

My dread for the girl kept returning in sudden flashes. Whatever Tamara contrived would be calculated to bring herself maximum pleasure and me maximum hurt. I walked faster, hoping for a house, a mountain resort, a ranger station.

Pere's purpose was being served. Only the fittest would survive the nights. From their number, a smaller group would

survive the desert sun. His lunatic scheme would work in its inexorable, vicious fashion.

The higher I went, the colder it grew. I walked as fast as I could to fight the chill. The climate and vegetation became alpine as I reached higher altitudes. Stones in the road were like razor blades to my bleeding feet.

Did the damn road go *anywhere*? I kept on. After a hundred years of climbing, up ahead I saw what appeared to be a sign. I ran toward it, ignoring the pain. The sign held four words and an arrow pointing up. These were the words — *Kitt Peak National Observatory*.

IX

IT WAS NO accident, of course. Tamara had arranged the whole thing with Cat or Wes. They were no doubt either in her pay or in her body — or both. I was probably fifty miles farther from Casa Culebra than Pere had intended. But I was where *Tamara* intended.

I entered the observatory area cautiously. A place that important would have guards. I was in the United States of America in the final quarter of the twentieth century. There would have to be guards.

Kitt Peak was impressive, dominated by a long white angled structure like a launching platform to fire burning arrows at the sun.

In the eeriness, it wouldn't have seemed strange for my ancestors to be dancing around the structure and making worshipful gestures at the moon. In the old days the mountain had been used for Indian religious ceremonies.

Now the modern religion of science had taken over. It was a place for people who knew what they were doing, and Edith was part of it. I had guessed she wasn't part of something small. There was nothing little about conquering a mountaintop with streets, houses and white observatories reaching out across space to grab the stars.

I didn't forget why I was there. Tamara had sent me. For her own twisted reasons. But I was not helpless. Tamara wouldn't want me helpless, of course. My struggle would be part of her kicks in this game within a game.

First, find Edith Winslow — rather second. First find a pair of pants. I looked for a house or a room without lights. I kept to the shadows, picked my house, approached with all the stealth the Papago Indian blood in me could manage. Maybe I could manufacture a little luck.

The doors were locked, front and back. A good sign. The people probably were away. I had no tools for professional breaking and entering, so it had to be amateur. When manufacturing luck, chances sometimes have to be taken. A large stone against

window glass was the method chosen. I was careful. Nevertheless glass flew, and my wrecked feet had to walk on the slivers — fast. If a guard heard, he would be on the way.

No one came. The gamble paid off. I found khakis — shirt and pants, plus worn loafers. I wasn't dressed for tea with the duchess, but I could pass through a police roadblock without setting off sirens. Puma in khakis was less conspicuous than Puma unadulterated. Before leaving the house, I caught a moonlight glimpse of myself in a mirror. Not the answer perhaps to love's young dream, but I would pass.

Confidence rose, due no doubt to those peculiar social roots in our heads — the "Don'ts" they skin-graft to our brains from the first waddle. One was — "Don't run around in public bare-bottomed." Funny, the correlation between clothes and confidence, since like many people, my best moments often came when getting out of clothes was supremely urgent.

I left the house behind, sparing a moment's regret for the absent owner. The window would be a nuisance. Maybe the saddest part for him would be the missing loafers. They were great, well broken in, comfortable to my slashed feet.

Caution was still essential. Kitt Peak was probably a place where you needed more than covered

loins. Like I.D. cards for instance. The better part of valor was to steer clear of everyone until I found Edith.

I saw a uniformed man in a jeep making his rounds. The old routine probably. He expected to see nothing and wouldn't. Men in the shadow games have one fat advantage — the lazy, trusting complacency of their targets. Innocent people, from city jungles to jungle jungles, tend to assume if they bother no one, no one will bother them. It's not a perfect formula in a world with a lot of shadows.

A doubt struck me. Suppose Edith didn't live on the mountain, suppose she just worked there, with a house in town or in the Santa Cruz valley. Tamara would find out, if she decided the information could bring her any laughs.

"Who are you, boy? Where you going?" It was a voice with deep, guttural, suspicious, western arrogance. A lawman's voice from a jeep. Lesson for young Puma — never assume, not about Arizonans in uniform.

"I was driving up to see a friend. Car died. Should teach me to buy American instead of those imports. Can't handle the mountains. I tried fixing it, but no luck. So I walked. 'Have to' is a good teacher."

I kept talking to mask nervousness and keep control. And to keep his head busy, give it something to work on.

His jeep lights had me square center. I stood quietly, no slouching. I spoke casual, slow, made it positive.

"Why you looking in house windows, boy?" He was youngish, heavyset, trying hard to sound ornery. John Wayne would have been proud. "Guess I'd better call the County Sheriff, do a little researching on you, boy."

I took a step forward. "You'll just get the horse laugh. It's the way I said. This is my first visit and I was trying to find my friend's place. Nothing else, mister, take my word. She was supposed to meet me on the steps of the observatory. But I'm way late, so she's not there."

"Who is this friend? She could tell if you belong, or if you're hoot-owling."

"I'm not hoot-owling. You can bet next month's wages. Her name is Edith Winslow."

I could see him relax. "I guess you're probably all right. Dr. Winslow's house is that way, one street down. Smartest woman I ever saw. Sure doesn't look like a mathematics wizard. Proves you can't go by looks. Me thinking you were hoot-owling, and you're more likely just partying, though you're not overdressed for it, are you?"

"I changed to work on that dead machine, and figured these were better for walking than a blue suit."

"You can say that again.

Wouldn't surprise me if they made that car to stop on a mountain road so you'd buy a new one. Those car outfits are all in collusion. They run the whole world, and they know it."

His was a lonely job and he liked to talk. I let him, but my impulse was to run for Edith's place. His next words made the impulse an obsession.

"Reckon Dr. Winslow's having a wingding tonight. I told a lady earlier where to go. Real pretty, thanked me nice. Between you and me, that was a woman with a let's-drop-everything-and-hit-the-hay look about her. Nothing like Dr. Winslow in that respect. The doctor is a real lady. Some tried to prove otherwise, but no luck so far as I know."

"Definitely a lady," I echoed. I couldn't let him know I was bleeding to death inside.

"Sorry I growled, mister. Get so I see things up here at night. The Indians claim this place has been haunted ten thousand years."

"You were just doing your job. I'm glad you're here. I think quite a bit of Dr. Winslow. Good night and thanks for the help."

"She's sure a looker to be so smart."

I walked away slowly until I was out of his view, then ran. Tamara and maybe the Indians were ahead of me. How long ahead and with what results? The house was lighted, every room,

out front one of my Tucson rentals. That was a predictable Tamara touch. I was careful. I couldn't afford even one mistake if the Indians were there.

They were, Cat leaning against the wall, Wes straddling a chair. Tamara held my rented Bernardelli. And Pere was there too, sitting in a chair, apparently talking to a door.

"Miss Winslow, my beauties can't wait forever. Perhaps already their patience is done. Miss Winslow, when I learned that Mr. Puma had made the acquaintance of an honored scholar who knows the secrets of the sun, I had to meet you.

"The sun is master of the divine mysteries. You must tell me about them. Not just numbers and dull things. That was your mistake before, my dear. That's why my little beauties became impatient."

Tamara watched with amusement, and barely veiled contempt.

"I beg you, Miss Winslow, tell me what the desert knows, what it learns from the sun. And I shall bid my little beauties rest."

What was he talking about? Where was Edith? Behind that door?

Tamara spoke, "Check again." Cat and Wes moved as though automated by her voice. I slid around the house to be absorbed in deeper shadows. From there I could see the closed room. She was tied to a chair with stockings.

The floor was slitheringly alive thanks to an assortment of Pere's beauties. An open cage stood near the door. The snakes were quarreling among themselves. Some were losing their shyness and winding themselves gracefully about Edith's bare ankles.

Her eyes were terror filled; and if the snakes neglected to sink poisonous fangs in her soft flesh, she might die of fright. I spent no time analyzing it.

The window was locked. To hell with the window. I kicked it in and vaulted inside. My hands didn't fumble. They knew exactly what to do. I seized the closest snakes to Edith and flung them through the broken window. How much time before Cat and Wes arrived? I was too busy to turn gray worrying about it. Some snakes my foot caught in the head. Others I squashed. One I pulped with thumb and forefinger. And all in seconds.

The relief in her eyes was like a nonbeliever finding heaven. More seconds for the untying. She said nothing when the stocking they had used as a gag to keep her from screaming fell from her mouth. Eyes said it all.

"Don't go in, don't disturb my beauties."

"*Merde* on your beauties!" shouted Tamara. She stood in the door with the Bernardelli. I threw a snake which caught her full in the face and bought me just enough time. Her hand jerked and

fired. The bullet sent one of Pere's beauties on a long journey to check out the divine mysteries. I seized the Bernardelli. It came to my hand like a homing pigeon.

"Out! Out, bitch!"

I threw another snake, a sidewinder, with my free hand. It wound about her shoulders. There was no panic in Tamara, no screaming tantrums. She pushed the creature aside and gazed at me calmly.

"You are mistreating my beauties!"

Where were the Indians? This had taken a long time, too long. "Out the window," I said to Edith, "Hurry."

I flipped the light switch and followed her through the window, steeled for bullets. None came. Cat and Wes must have gone away from the house searching for me. Keep searching, chums.

I sent one glance back into the nightmare room, and saw, or imagined, snake eyes in the darkness. Edith grasped my hand tightly. "Darling!" she said, just once, and we ran.

When we were far enough to stop running, I pulled her into my arms and we were fused like rivers meeting, like stars colliding, like love. "Another bite from another poisonous viper," I said, "See a doctor, doctor, before the venom reaches your heart. You've finally met my family. Snakes beget snakes."

"Don't say that. Not ever. Not

to me. You aren't responsible for that sick old man, or Tamara. Let's find the security guard. He'll call the sheriff's office."

"We can't," I said.

"What do you mean, darling?"

"There are more reasons than you have questions. Just believe me, I can't go that route."

She said nothing for long moments and I couldn't see her eyes in the darkness. Then her lips spoke for her without words. We could do it my way. No questions. All the answers of life were on Edith Winslow's lips.

"We have to leave here the quickest way. Where's your car?"

"At the house. The keys are in the bedroom with the reptiles."

"That leaves walking, I guess. Can you hold on, Lady Luck?"

"I can hold on — to you Dennis. As long as you say."

And I was the one who brought the snake people to her, put her in that cauldron of evil. So what could I say, except, "Doctor Winslow, the guard thinks you're smart, which is no doubt true, but you sure must have a screw loose somewhere. Come on, Lady Luck, let's catch the next streetcar down the mountain."

X

PERHAPS THE GUARD was right and Indian spirits did haunt that mountain. Ancient cousins of mine must have guided us down. Edith kept up and made no

protest. We moved fast down steep and pathless cliffs. My Indian blood had a chance to do its thing. I couldn't chance the road with Tamara behind us.

"Are there any cabins, any side roads this way? Something away from the main road that wouldn't be generally known."

She shook her head. "Dennis, we could go back. I have friends at the Peak. They would help us, no questions asked."

"It won't work that way, Edith. You don't know Tamara. Forget going to friends, anybody you care about. You would just bring them trouble they couldn't handle and not help yourself. We'll do it alone. I'll see you safe. Then..."

I didn't finish the thought, and she didn't ask. She had the gift of patience. Watching stars must develop a talent for waiting. If not tonight, tomorrow night, or the next.

"Dennis, I think I do remember a place. Driving once on the east side of Kitt, I saw an old mining road. I didn't follow it up, but all roads lead somewhere."

"We'll try it," I decided, "Do you have a feel for the direction?"

She glanced at the sky, oriented herself in relation to the stars, and without hesitation pointed in a particular direction. "*There,*" she said.

"You're something," I told her. "Something and a half."

"Everyone knows Polaris, the North Star," she said, "Find

north, you can find anything."

"I found everything at a crap table in Old Mexico."

She squeezed my hand, and I knew she would stick to the end, trusting me and my reasons. We would do it together.

We did it together. We found the long abandoned road, which had been taken over by wilderness or fallen boulders in many places, but was still a road, or at least the memory of a road. It took hours, but we reached the abandoned mining camp both of us had taken for granted.

Dawn was beginning to happen when we reached the camp. Our tension let down a notch or two, and I noticed suddenly that the girl was shivering. Neither of us was dressed for a mountain climbing expedition on a November night.

During our flight, there had been no time or energy to think about the cold. Now maybe we had reached a place where we could stop running. That's all anyone has a right to expect, a place to stop running for a while.

"This will do," I said, "Let's get you warm."

"Hold me, Dennis."

"I'll hold you."

I spread branches for us, like my ancient cousins, in a cabin once occupied by miners of another decade, perhaps of another century.

"It's not exactly the Taj Mahal, but it's paid for and it's all ours."

Edith came toward me. "The Taj Mahal is a tomb, and where we are is life."

She reached me and I kept my promise. When we woke, the sun was playing Peeping Tom. I looked into her eyes. She kissed me and said she had just then come awake herself.

"Are the snakes gone, all shaken loose and sent wiggling away?"

"No." She smiled. "Drive them away again, darling. You know how."

That time was the best between us. She cried when it was over, and I tasted her tears on my lips. Neither of us spoke. Words wouldn't cover it. We slept again. Then I was awake first, and her eyes opened as I dressed.

She didn't smile. "You're going back to them, wherever they are."

"I must, Lady Luck. No choice."

I had run to make her safe. I had to go back to keep her safe. I couldn't explain it. I couldn't tell her about the naked men in the desert, Pere, Tamara, all the rest of it. It was outside the range of her equations, beyond the reach of her telescopes.

For malignant things you need microscopes. For Tamara and those with her you need the Bernardelli. How could Edith understand? That world was a billion light years from everything she knew.

"Where in the bedroom?"

"The keys? In my purse. On the bureau."

"Give me an hour. Then follow the road back. I imagine they're gone. Things are cooking back at the ranch. They may leave one of the Indians, so take no chances. If you see one of them, especially Tamara or the old man, run and keep running."

"She spoke so contemptuously of you, as if you were an insect to be fed through wires to the old man's pets. Were you her lover?"

"We did sex together. I was never her lover. Maybe I thought so once, but I know better now. Tamara's an empress of evil, and for a while I was one of her thugs in waiting."

"Thanks for telling me the truth."

We were on a haunted mountain, and she was naked in a pile of branches. Try it yourself. Take the right companion to such a place. Make love. Not the other thing, not just sex. Make love. And if the dialogue doesn't turn slightly sappy, you probably didn't take the right companion. Try again on another mountain. Keep trying until you run out of mountains.

"Yes," whispered Edith, "Love." It was true, including the leaves making music overhead. Don't jeer till you've given it a try.

"Wait an hour," I repeated, "Then follow. Look your place over carefully. Take no chances. I'll have your car. I'm sorry, kid,

I'm sorry about all this."

She smiled at me, sunlight in her eyes. "I'm not sorry, kid, not the least bit."

"Don't stay at your place tonight. Tamara might come back."

"I'm not worried about Tamara."

"It would be wise to worry. She's hard and smart, the way the old man used to be. And she's instinctively mean, which he never was."

Trying to warn Edith, I suddenly understood something about the Game of the Succession. Maybe I began to see what it was really all about. Tamara.

"I can't worry for *me*, Dennis. My whole supply is used up on you."

"Stay with friends. Tell the guard you're worried. Get him talking and he won't pry. He's a good man, I think."

It was time to go. I moved down the trail, not looking back. Her voice caught up with me.

"All right, Dennis Puma." She was answering all the questions, asked and yet to ask.

"All right, Edith Winslow."

I didn't stop, I didn't speak aloud, but I think she heard me. She was good at hearing, as she was good at sticking. *Keep her safe, keep the snakes away*, I told my spirit cousins as I worked my way up the old road.

At her house, my rented car was gone, but hers was where it

belonged. Did someone stay behind when they left? I decided not.. Tamara would have packed her picnic basket and decided to try again another day when there were fewer ants and less rain. She was a professional.

I should have been more cautious opening the front door. They left friends: gila monsters, rattlers, coral snakes. Settled in to live happily ever after. Edith's sane abode had been transformed into a lunatic Casa Culebra II.

I let a diamondback have it in the neck with the heel of my stolen right loafer. I walked through, ignoring them. I got Edith's purse, found a suitcase in the closet and fitted it with women things. On the night table were a slide rule and note pad. She was a girl who worked equations before sleeping. I put them in the case. When a snake got in my path, I practiced for the next snake-kicking Olympics.

I was starting her car when a familiar voice spoke. "Boy, where you going with the doctor's car and stuff?"

"I'm taking them to her. We met last night, remember?"

"Breaking and entering. Car stealing. You won't argue if I ask you to hand me those keys, boy, and we'll just step over to the house, see what Doctor Winslow says about all this."

"She isn't there, guard. But see for yourself. You were friendlier last night."

His eyes on me were like hundred pound weights. "How did your face get scratched that way? Something's beginning to scare the daylights out of me, boy."

I walked ahead of him to the front door and stepped aside. He wasn't suspicious enough. He knocked, and when there was no answer, he slowly entered. The diamondback I had stunned was emerging from retirement and trying for a comeback. Practice makes better. It caught the guard in the fleshly part of his arm. I pulled him out.

He was going to be pretty sick, and I was sorry for setting him up. I intended a scare, not a two-fang hit.

"Is there a doctor up here?"

"Nurse at the infirmary. She handles snakebites well enough. It won't be the first time." He was cool. I was right, he was a good man, if stubborn. Or maybe, a good man because stubborn.

I drove him in Edith's car. At the dispensary, the nurse took over. She was a Miss-Bedpan-of-1940 type, crisp, brisk, and a thousand percent competent. The guard seemed to have changed his mind about me again. He merely nodded when I mentioned shoving off to meet Doctor Winslow. He would ask later about the diamondback, when I had more time and he felt better.

As expected, I caught up with her on the road heading home.

"Get in. Change of plans."

"They're still there?"

"Not all of them. Just the crawling ones. Your house needs a reptile exorcist in a bad way."

As I maneuvered the mountain road, I told her we would find a motel on Miracle Mile in Tucson.

"You'll be safer away from this mountain until Tamara gets new interests. Call your boss and tell him you need a few days of last year's vacation."

"How did you know all my vacation wasn't used?"

"You're the type, honey. I grabbed some stuff for you. Sorry I didn't have time to be neat. Afraid your guests might not like it."

"I don't mind. Neatness is an overrated virtue."

She opened the suitcase and laughed when she saw the slide rule and the notebook. "I've found better ways to fall asleep," she said.

XI

THERE WERE SIGNS of hard struggle. The white man's head was crushed. The black man, gripping a large stone, was almost on top of him. It wouldn't be easy to remove that stone. The black man apparently intended carrying it into eternity for protection. Maybe he succeeded.

Both men were dead. Both were naked. The scene was a mess. Their faces were badly mauled.

Animals had been at them, insects, carnivorous birds. The desert had an appetite.

The Highway Patrolmen stood there, shaking their heads. They weren't touching anything. This was a meat job for a coroner with strong insides.

"Move along," said one of the patrolmen to nobody in particular. There was no crowd. It was a low-traffic road near Tucson. A few cars stopped out of curiosity, ours among them, though my reason held more than curiosity.

They had been chums before, the black man and Atelli from Milano. I remembered the crude jokes, the near friendship among strangers. Now they were carrion for birds, coroners, and coyotes.

The papers would call it a bizarre desert mystery. It was a mystery to me, too. I knew all the facts, but not the whys. "Why" was a mystery I might never solve. Did they know each other when it happened, or did they simply get on with the job at hand? To learn the answer, I'd have to cross over and look for a black man gripping a stone.

We drove on toward the city. "They were your people, Dennis?"

"So long, black man," I said softly, "So long, Atelli."

"They were with you at the casino."

I nodded. "Crazy, not to know a man's name when he's dead. He was just the black man from some

place on the coast of Mozambique. Ending up as Nobody from Nowhere. Atelli from Milano, we did jobs together. He didn't sweat much. That's how I remember Atelli.

"Italians are sweaters, but Atelli was always cool. Even when it was roughest, Atelli was cool. I underrated him. I wouldn't have thought he could take the black man with him. Maybe it wasn't Atelli. Maybe it was the desert. But what it comes down to, the game did it for both of them.

"It was her party all the way. She sent the invitations, planned the favors, made the dip. Atelli and the black man left early. Party poopers. So long, Atelli. So long, black man. You're out of it now. Lucky."

She stared straight ahead at the road, the long gray snake American road. She let me talk it out.

"Just one day ago she tied the blindfolds and sent us out naked and afraid. Read a poem once by an Englishman. Hastings would know the name. 'I a stranger and afraid in a world I never made.'"

"A. E. Housman," she said.

"Probably. Out we went, blindfolded, naked and afraid, to play a game and win a kingdom. One day gone. The Highway Patrol better call in extras. They're going to be busy. Stay awake, birds. Keep the coroners sober. The meat business is coming into boom times."

I told her all of it. She stayed on her side; strapped in. She didn't say much.

"Don't judge us by the game," I argued for her benefit, for my own, "Successions are always a problem. Pere was great, but time erodes. Like your big hot star up there. It's devouring itself, right, and one day we'll wake up and find there's nothing left. Our big hot star ate itself up."

"Pere's gone now. My hunch is he's become a puppet for Tamara. We have to think of the game as an aberration. The rest of it is simply business, organized, bureaucratic, twentieth century monkey business. I won't defend the business, but I won't condemn it either."

"When the old man was in his prime, there was no outfit anywhere that had more on the ball than we did. So I choose not to condemn the business. Properly managed, it does the job. Aberrations needn't be permanent, not with modern surgery."

"I've seen some of the surgery."

Her words shook me awake. I had been off somewhere on a wild safari. The black man and Atelli had been rough to take. Where was it happening now? Gradnor? Arenson? All of them? All of us?

The Trembling T Motor Hotel on Miracle Mile was the choice, and they had a vacancy in spite of the November snowbird rush.

"You folks are lucky," said the clerk. "From now through March, the snowbirds are going to keep us N-V every day."

"You hope," I said, and he smiled agreement.

We found the cabin. It was clean, smooth, ersatzé, standard American plastic. It was every American's home away from home, the world capital of hit-and-run lovemaking. It would do.

"You should buy some clothes," she said, not looking at me. She was troubled by the things I said, but nothing had changed between us. She was everything and a half. "I have money and cards in my purse."

I shook my head. I was wearing what every well-dressed man in my position should wear, and I had the Bernardelli in my pocket. For the work ahead, my attire was the prescribed fashion. The only improvement would have been an extra clip of bullets.

"You're going back now."

"I have to. You know. You've seen. You said it yourself. It has to go through to its natural end."

We didn't look at the side by side beds. It was too much the wrong time. Would it ever be the right time again? I started out.

"Aren't you going to kiss me?"

"I was afraid you'd had it with the talk and the black man and Atelli. I was afraid."

Then her arms held me and I was less afraid. Hers was a comeback kiss, mine a goodbye.

"I'll try," I said.

I drove fast on the Mile and turned left at Speedway past the suburban shopping centers with their acres of parked cars and their crowds of plump, sleepy, suburban Americans. Edith was okay. She was out of it now. Comes young Puma's turn. Puma and the Bernardelli, Europe's last famous team.

I turned right again at Campbell, making a sudden but potentially smart detour. Despite the years, the layout of Tucson was coming back to me. Without maps, I knew where I was and where I was going. The detour was to Jerry's place on Ajo where I picked up extra ammo for the clip in the Bernardelli. One learns precautionary foresight, if one stays alive.

On the Sabino Canyon road, I saw another clot of Highway Patrol and people at roadside. I pulled in.

"Who would walk in this country without shoes?" a man asked.

It was Gradnor, alone and very dead. He was wearing faded torn blue overalls. Gradnor, who sported Paris fashions and cultivated the tastes of a sybarite, shriveled in the desert, dressed in stolen rags a scarecrow would have refused. His feet were awful.

Three down, the rest to go.

All the cars were in the parking lot, the two I had rented and the others. Casa Culebra seemed

infinitely peaceful. Golden spears of reflected sunlight danced from the front. I took it for granted the Indians were about. They were loyalists. It was their misfortune that I didn't feel qualified to take a chance with either.

All my instincts were at battle stations with time and a half for overtime guaranteed. They weren't trying to hide. They stepped out from the house. My hand was taut on the Bernardelli. I let it relax. They weren't armed.

"You're home early, Mr. Puma," said Cat, "three days was the rule."

"I'm changing the rules, Cat. I've declared myself winner and the game finished."

"Excellent, Mr. Puma. That certainly explains your presence. Welcome home, Mr. Puma. Congratulations on your victory."

"Thanks. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to take a shower and put on something less dressy."

"Why of course we don't mind, Mr. Puma. You're the victor. And to the victor belongs the...Just what is it belongs to the victor?"

"The spoils, Cat, to the victor belong the spoils."

"Of course, the spoils. Step inside and claim your spoils, Mr. Puma."

"There's another old saying, Cat, the one about an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. You are good boys. I respect you. I wish I didn't respect you

quite so much. You fellows are too good, which is hard luck on you.

"It's the old story. The good people get the *merde* assignments. The goof-offs eat chicken in the messhall during working hours. You shouldn't have gone with her to the mountain, fellows. That was in bad taste. That was a *merde* assignment. That was below your style in my opinion."

"Thank you, Mr. Puma. I suppose it wouldn't suffice if we resigned immediately without the usual two weeks notice."

"I'm afraid not, Cat. You're good boys, and you couldn't put it aside so easily. Also there's my responsibility to the girl. We're at cross-purposes, you see. I can't trust you not to be trustworthy."

"An Indian standoff, Mr. Puma. As for the woman and the snakes, may we point out she is a white woman."

"She's *my* woman, Cat."

"She's *your* white woman," said Wes with a grin.

They were good. But they weren't modern enough for the last quarter of a bad century. Both were smiling, slowly separating, forming a circle. If the Bernardelli coughed at one, while it was clearing its throat, the other would be on me. That was the plan, but too old-fashioned. The Bernardelli coughed twice, very fast, no time for throat clearings.

"I'm sorry, Cat," I said, "I'm sorry you weren't a goof-off."

Wes was silent but Cat could still talk. "Congratulations, Mr. Puma, we'll wait for you at the mountain."

I wanted him to understand. "She's *my* woman, Cat," I explained. But Cat had stopped listening. I should have let him know that while an aberration is running its course, there are no victors, only victims. But he wouldn't have heard me.

I knew where to find them, and that's where I headed.

XII

THEY WERE IN the snake room together. Pere and Tamara. The old man was purring seductively at his reptiles. Tamara was close to the old man. She was rubbing her hand slowly up and down inside his shirt. They made a ludicrous parody of the erotic. She was gazing off sightlessly through a private fog. There was a tiny little-girl smile beneath her vacant eyes.

The Bernardelli was in my pocket. I didn't know what to expect from Tamara. Her record was consistent. The only thing predictable about her was that she would be unpredictable.

"What was it all about?" I asked them.

Neither reacted. They were far away. The old man was making reptile talk. She was even more remote, having sex alone where snakes and stars collide.

"I've declared myself winner," I told them.

They weren't interested. Pere had released the control that regulated the doors in his orchard of reptiles. Their tunnels open, his servants of death were heading for the central arena, each driven by personal ambitions, each seeking some higher destiny. It was a Game of Succession in miniature, nature striving for a natural end.

Delighting in the spectacle, Pere came back long enough to stress the lesson. "Observe, Mr. Puma, my beauties prove the victory of death over life. It's the desert's final lesson, Mr. Puma. There it is, the beautiful fate of all. Each takes the life of the other as his life is taken. It is the symbiosis of natural animosity."

He was babbling, a dying monarch in a kingdom of babble. "Crap!" I said, "There's no time for crap."

At the center of the cage the creatures were locked together in a writhing, twisting ball of death. Tamara's hand remained inside the old man's shirt, slowly moving up and down, up and down. They were perfectly content. They could keep it up forever. The old man with his babble and his snakes. Tamara massaging his chest and making love to herself in some faroff place.

I was there to settle things, but it was all settled. They had

escaped me. Nothing I said would register. Nothing I did would matter. I wanted to take a walk. Get out of there, away from the sickness, the corruption, the madness. Back home to Edith and to life.

There were things I had to know, but watching them, I knew it all. The game was her conception, staged for her entertainment and benefit. Whatever Pere once had been, time and Tamara had worked their nasty magic and changed him to this haunted, lost, obsessed cadaver, sovereign in a cage of death and babble.

She used Pere and the rest of us for kicks. She had settled the succession long ago. *The stooge is dead, long live Tamara.* Her scheme was cunning too, bright as stolen gold. Arrange for us to kill each other off like Alexander's generals. That way she could have her fun while cleaning out the stable of Pere's old hands. Whichever of us was left at the end could become her new stooge. *Long live Tamara!*

But she had made a mistake, a woman mistake. She had brought Edith into her web of snakes. That had changed the equation too much. It couldn't stand the strain. Now she was working out her own natural end at some damned meeting place of snakes and stars. I couldn't even hate her. Each of us had been a threat, so she took steps. That was all.

A whirlpool of destruction was

underway inside the cage. It was a kid's sandbox compared to the Armageddon inside Tamara's beautiful head. Yes, beautiful. Beauty without, slime within.

Yet, knowing all I knew, her beauty was still a trap. My mind vomited at the thought, but my body wanted hers at that lunatic moment. I could have pulled her to the floor and forced an entrance to the dark babble world she inhabited. Mindless body could squirm with her again, while Pere watched with sexual pleasure the death throes of his beauties.

"You set us all up," I said, "Add Cat and Wes to the list. You set them up too, knowing I would have to kill them."

"It wasn't nice," said Tamara, her hand moving in his shirt, "It wasn't nice. You once tried to make Tamara happy. She made you an enemy. It wasn't nice."

"Pere called you his daughter."

"Oh yes, dear daddy, dear daddy, dear daddy, lover daddy."

I believed her. Her daddy and her lover. She had done as she pleased with Pere, with the others, with Edith, with me. Playing things out to her natural end. She hadn't considered or cared that one of us might turn on her.

She would shrug, say, "But I am beautiful. Men want me. They must have me. They would not spoil my party." She assumed men forever would look at her with their bodies, not their minds. The party would go on and on.

What now? Summon outsiders to take Pere away and lock him up in a place where he could talk with invisible snakes until the skeleton she had left him called it quits? Tamara too might be judged insane, but they would have to be quick and clever. Those responsible likely would not be clever or swift enough for her.

The quick solution was the Bernardelli. Another way, more poetic, was taping her to a chair, breaking the cage with bullets, leaving them to their serpents. The snakes no doubt would enjoy expanding their playing field.

The Bernardelli remained in my pocket. The cage stayed unbroken. They weren't alive, and I couldn't kill the dead. At least the Indian boys had been alive and trying.

I walked out of there. If I tried hard maybe I could find my way back to the world again.

XIII

I WAS LEAVING Casa Culebra. I didn't know how far I was going or where. My first stop would be the Trembling T Motor Hotel in Tucson. With Tamara alive, we had to do some running. We could manage.

In my room, I filled the bag quickly. It was a room for hangovers and nocturnal sex orgies with Tamara. Every additional minute there was a bad year. I wanted to be far away, within reaching distance of life. Edith,

fantastic as it seemed, was waiting.

But they wouldn't let it lie. They wouldn't leave me alone.

"I say, young Puma, it's a bit irregular, us meeting this way, somewhat prematurely. Why did you break the contract, young Puma? A touch of beddy-bye with herself? Confess to the same thoughts, meself, among others."

Hastings held a police .38 revolver. It was pointed in my direction. The black phallic barrel didn't waver. He was dressed in the uniform of an Arizona Highway Patrolman. Neat. No signs of passing through an ordeal.

"Young Puma, the uniform was a divine gift. No other explanation serves. I was feeling quite forlorn and exceedingly unadorned, you know, when the wearer of this uniform and his companion happened providentially along.

"My condition startled them. But when I explained the charming details, they were sympathetic. They offered to drive me to their headquarters, but that plan conflicted somewhat with my own.

"So I eventually persuaded them to accept my plan.

"Wasn't that nice of them, young Puma. I say, you aren't disposed to boyish carelessness I hope. That hand near your right pocket, I should imagine it would be chummier clasped with your other hand behind your back."

I was still alive thanks to Hastings' Liverpool frustrations.

What he mainly loved on earth was own voice, talking, talking, talking.

"You played it dumb, Hastings. You should have waited at the road, out-of sight, and picked us off one by one as we made it back."

"Young Puma, your cunning rivals my own. I intended precisely that. But you drove in. That was improper, young Puma, quite outside the rules. I decided to discuss the matter openly with you, persuade you to reach certain conclusions I find it wistfully necessary to choose, and then return to my watching place, where I shall indeed pick off the dear lads one by one as they painfully return. I shall strive to console our lovely Tamara, young Puma. Have you any final words of wisdom?"

"You've taken all the words, Hastings, and turned them into verbal *merde*."

"Oh my, young Puma — how unfriendly! One shouldn't take a game so seriously. It isn't sporty."

He might have yakked himself to death before he got around to me. That was my one chance the way things stood. Then both of us received a gift of sound from on high. A crashing noise came from the wing where Pere and Tamara were high on their private brands of poisoned whoopie.

"The pets are acting up," I said.

"Ah yes, the chummy little

kingdom of snakes. Has the old one decided to join his beauties, the lovely Tamara looking on and clapping her hands? She is such a simple girl, so easy to entertain."

His chatter continued. He hadn't a worry on the world. He was intoxicated by the syrupy music from his own mouth, and one shouldn't drink on the job. Hastings was an efficient man generally, but he had never learned to keep his mouth shut.

He couldn't zipper his insatiable trap, and that made him careless. Fatally so. Silently down the hall came a third intruder. He was fat, ugly, naked, and very welcome. He had gone upstairs, precipitated some crashing effect among the snakes, and now was tip-toeing up to surprise our British cousin.

The third man's toadstool face was a positive swamp of smiling good cheer. In his hands was a shovel from the yard. An excellent tool for shattering glass to give Pere's beauties their right to life, liberty and the pursuit of Tamara. An excellent tool for permanently bending the bone in Hastings head. My worry was the .38 would go off by reflex when the shovel hit.

"Let's talk about this, Hastings. When this is over, there are going to be problems. We could use each other. Cooperation, if you know what I mean."

"Charming word, young Puma. The empire was built on it, but

preserved I'm afraid with a bit more sternness. And there is this further point, young Puma. We are playing a game you know. And games after all are not unimportant, are they? I mean, there is such a thing as honor."

Right then the shovel appropriately took him. It had several hundred pounds of blubber behind it and was brought down clumsily, but very effectively. The sound was convincing and final. Hastings fell forward, trying to say something, consistent to the end. The .38 stayed in his hand, unfired.

My rescuer laughed happily, hoisted the shovel, lumbered toward me. His mouth was open, his lips moving like some wet beast engaged in love-making.

"Puma, sweetheart," cooed Tarmack obscenely, "I was so hoping the birds didn't eat you."

His gaping oral cavity was wide open, and the Bernardelli gave him a hot kiss between his thick white teeth. The bullet sang the *Liebestod*, the love-death music, and planted oblivion in his corrupt, chubby brain. The shovel fell, and Tarmack made the soft, squashy sound of a beached whale as he oozed to the floor.

Hastings was neat and British even in death. I could see no blood on the uniform. When the trooper got it back, it would need only a good cleaning. There were no permanent stains.

I looked in upstairs. The dance

was vastly enlarged. The shovel had been a great emancipator. Snakes were everywhere. Tarmack had tied her to a chair. Great minds in single channels run. Pere was in a state of ecstasy, embracing his beauties with lust. Reptiles, spiders, ants, it was a confined universe of love and death.

Tamara's eyes were closed, her face transported. She was not fighting or screaming. She was squirming sensuously, reaching for a climax. I left them there, snakes and Pere and Tamara, to work it out among themselves. Perhaps out of it might come some brief cleansing and simplification.

Only a few chores remained. I drove one of the rental cars I had signed for to the parking lot in front of the National Parks office at the entrance to Sabino Canyon. I walked the mile and a half back to Casa Culebra and did the same with car number two. I would turn the keys in, tell them where to find the cars, and pay whatever was necessary.

The second walk to Casa Culebra was the last and toughest part. On the desert, naked desperate men were still moving about, each with every hour becoming less a man and more a beast at bay. Every shadow potentially held one of those driven animals. One could be waiting for me in the drive.

Alarms to no purpose. Evening shadows had taken over at Casa

Culebra. Night's usual sounds prevailed. The dead made no sound. I got in Edith's car, turned on the lights, and drove away, leaving the snake house to the dead and the others who soon enough would join them.

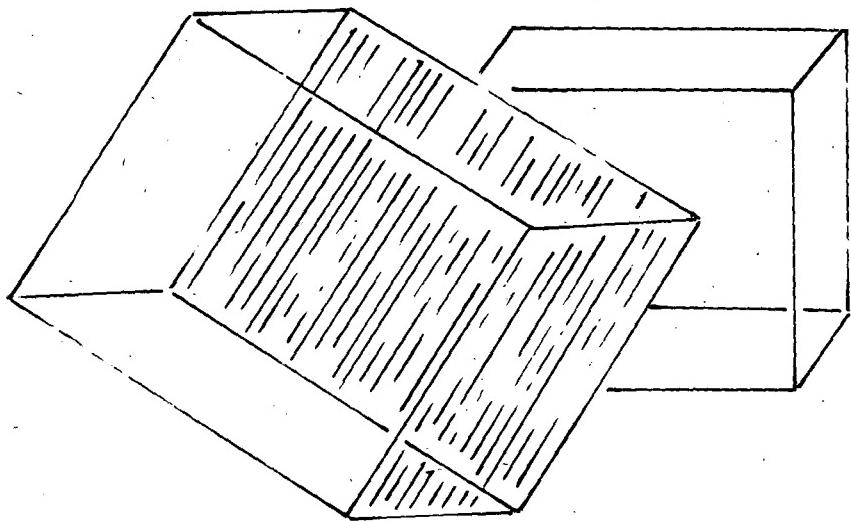
Let them play the game out to whatever end they could. I had declared myself the winner, and I was going home to claim my prize.

I would never return to Casa Culebra. Eventually perhaps, or perhaps not — who could tell? — I might go back, not to the house, but to Paris, or Zurich or one of the other places, and begin the task of putting the pieces together. It was a job I could do. Did I want it?

The drive back gave excessive time to think. But even long drives end, and Edith's car had brought me close to Edith. All right, which? Drive past for her sake or pick up the dice, ask Lady Luck to blow on them again and try for another natural? With always a chance of snake eyes.

The stars gave no counsel. I was on my own. It was strictly mine to settle. Continue on to Zurich and reject the gamble as a sucker's game? Or head for Lady Luck and throw the dice, the hell with snake eyes.

I saw the flickering lights of the Trembling T. I turned the wheel and parked the car. There were daily planes to New York with connections to Zurich. I got out of the car and went inside where Edith was waiting.



Boxed In

by D.C. POYER

All Roby needed was \$300 — but where and how was he going to get it?

THREE HUNDRED, thought Roby Tucker for the hundredth time that day. *Three hundred. That's all I need to get me out of this mess.*

He hitched up his jeans and his mind slid away from his money

troubles as a car full of adolescent girls cruised up Main Street. The girls stared at Roby, then looked away. *Like I was trash*, he thought.

One glanced back at him

through the rear window and smiled but he looked away and spat on the sidewalk. He turned his head to show his profile and lit a butt and flipped away the match. His mind slid back to money.

The cycle dealer was on his back about payments on his Harley. The fat man who owned Rainey's Billiard Academy had sent his goons to remind Roby about the hundred bucks he owed. On top of that, Gloria had been careless again and he needed enough to have her fixed up before it started to show.

Gloria's okay, he thought, digging his thumbs under his belt. But I'm a rovin' kind of guy. That's just the way I am.

He mused on that for awhile, seeing himself as strong and tough and caring for nothing.

At noon Roby swung onto his bike and gunned it expertly. He moved forward in first, his boots dragging in the dust, then peeled out and scorched down Main Street at sixty. He decided to stop at the Zodiac for a while and see what, if anything, was shaping up for the night.

Bo and Spitfire were already there. Spitfire, head shaven and biceps bulging out of his tight-fitting T-shirt, hunched across a corner table and made remarks to the bargirl, a flustered little blonde. New to the bar, Roby noted. Bo was behind the counter,

drawing beer. They were the only ones there at this early hour.

"Hey, you shouldn't be drawin' beer. You shoulda let me do it," the blonde said nervously. Bo blew suds on the counter from the glass he had just filled.

"Don't worry now, honey," drawled Bo. "You gonna get your tip. Don'cha want me back here with you? Hey, Roby, how ya doing? Wanna beer?"

"Yeah," said Roby, nodding to Spitfire. He sat at the table.

Bo, hands full with three glasses, edged along the bar to get out. He crowded the girl against the counter as he passed behind her. He came over to the table and set the beers down, slopping foam on the scarred wood. He passed one to Roby and all three drank deep for a moment. Spitfire belched in satisfaction. He smiled at the blonde waitress.

"That'll be dollar-fifty for the beers," she said. She sounded cheerful but looked scared, shaken. There was a quaver in her voice.

Bo slapped change on the table. Spitfire and Roby added some copper and fake-silver to it. "Here it is," said Spitfire.

"With your tip," said Roby, making a squeezing motion to Bo with one hand. The girl saw it. She looked wildly around the empty barroom.

"Well, why don't we say those were on the house," she said

lightly, too cheerfully.

Bo sniggered in his glass. Spitfire swung his boots up on the table, *clunk clunk*, and leered meaningfully at her. Roby said, "Naw. We can pay for 'em. And how about your tip? Here it is" and he poked the little pile of nickels and pennies with a tobacco-stained finger. The coins were wet with beer froth.

Suzy bit her lip and slowly walked over to the corner table. The three men stared at her as she came. She had to bend over Spitfire to scoop the wet coins from the table. Bo ran his fingers up the inside of her leg. She broke away, stumbled and ran back to the register.

The men laughed and talked in stage whispers about her and what they would like to do to her. She punched the register blindly and rang up the three beers. A dollar thirty, they had given her.

Roby Tucker drank beer and said to Spitfire, "Hey Spit, how you fixed for dough?"

"I can let you have a five," said Spitfire lazily. He fingered the bill from his shirt pocket and flipped it toward Roby.

"I don't mean gas money," said Roby, "I need three-four hundred till I get the Harley fixed up and win a couple of races. Just for a month or so."

Spitfire's pale blue eyes turned cautious. They slid away from Roby's. He wiped his mouth with

the back of his hand.

"Naw, I ain't...I ain't got that kinda money right now, Roby. My job don't pay me that much and Belle don't...Naw, I just don't got it to give ya, Roby."

"I gotta take a leak," said Bo. He shoved his chair back and left the table.

Roby and Spitfire were silent. They drank beer. Presently Bo came out of the john and belched loudly.

"How 'bout somethin' decent to drink, boys?" said Spitfire, pulling a bottle of vodka from under his shirt.

HIS OLD MAN was asleep on the ratty couch when Roby let himself in that afternoon. Roby's mom had died a while back and his old man had hit the skids pretty bad. He had been with the railroad but had been fired for drinking and causing an accident. Now he had a cheap job as night watchman in a furniture warehouse.

Roby shoved police and nudie magazines, cigar wrappers and beer cans off the chair and sat down heavily. He felt unreal and lightheaded from the beer and vodka. He lit a cigaret and looked at his dad until the old man felt the stare and woke up.

Joe Tucker sat up slowly on the couch. He rubbed his fat face and its bristly black-and-gray growth.

"You back again," he growled. His gut drooped over the ragged edge of the couch. His left hand

fumbled over the chipped end table, over his false teeth, and contacted a half-empty pint bottle of bourbon. It was already uncorked and alcohol spilled on the old man's undershirt before he got the bottle to his lips.

"Hi, Dad," said Roby innocently. "Just wanted to see how you was gettin' along."

The old man laughed harshly, then coughed. He coughed for a long time, racking his lungs. Roby felt spittle fall on his hand. The old man sank back on the couch.

"I'm doin' all right," he insisted. "You bring any cigarettes, boy?"

"Yeah, Dad. Here, keep it, I got another pack."

"Thanks, Roby."

They smoked in silence for a few minutes. After a time Joe got up and walked unsteadily into the kitchen.

"You want some coffee?" he called back.

"Yeah, sure," said Roby. At that moment he felt that he needed coffee badly. He felt as if his body was sitting still and dead and absolutely nothing was going on in his brain. The vodka had done this to him. He remembered the clear gleam of the light through the vodka bottle and the light gurgle and burn of the liquor going down. He thought that he would not drink vodka any more, at least not straight.

"You take sugar?" asked his old man from the kitchen.

"Yeah, Dad, I always take sugar."

"Oh, yeah," said his dad. He brought his own coffee out in a railroad union mug and Roby's in a stained plastic Batman cup.

The couch sagged slowly under Joe's weight.

"How's Gloria? You gonna marry her?" he asked.

"Naw," said Roby.

The old man offered the bourbon bottle to Roby, who refused it with a shake of his head, then poured the last few drops into his coffee.

"Pop," said Roby suddenly.

"Yeah, Roby?"

"I...I'm in kind of a jam. Look, I need some money."

His dad finished the coffee with a loud, slurping noise and sat the mug down. He looked away from Roby, at the wall. "How much money, Roby?"

"Three hundred. Pop, I could maybe make do with two. But I need it now."

His dad looked at the wall for several seconds more and then got up and rummaged around on top of the TV for a minute and came back with a letter. He held it out to Roby.

"What's that?"

"Here, take it. Look at it."

He opened it. Inside was a tax bill for four hundred and sixty bucks.

"Gone up again," said his dad. "I was goin' to ask *you* for money. It's six months old already. If we

can't pay this we stand to lose the house."

Roby stared at the bill.

His father looked in his pockets and then in his wallet. He found a two-dollar bill and held it out to Roby.

"How's about goin' down to Lee's and pickin' me up another pint of this. We'll kill it together."

"That's okay, Pop. I'm kind of hung over."

The old man held the bill out toward his son. "Well, get yourself some supper, then. Here. I got enough to last me till payday."

Roby looked at the old man his father had become. He slowly reached out and took the crumpled bill.

"Thanks, Dad," he said.

Boxed in, he thought hopelessly. He decided it was time to eat.

Gloria brought him a bowl of chili, with crackers on the side and a Coke. He sat in the booth alone and ate and drank slowly. After awhile she came back and sat opposite him. Gloria had fat legs and pouting lips. Her hair was colored red.

"Where you been the last two days?" she asked. "I was waitin' for you last night and you never showed up."

"I went out," he mumbled over his food. She gave him a sharp glance and then half-turned, checking the counter for customers. She turned back and

looked at him closely again. Her hands twisted together underneath the table.

"I was sick again this morning," she said.

"Oh, yeah?" said Roby.

She slumped back wearily into the booth. "Yeah. And I been on my feet all day today."

"When you gonna be done with work?" Roby asked.

"Six," she said.

"I'll wait," Roby said. He was not sure whether he really would or not. He finished his chili. Gloria tried to get him to have a piece of pie for dessert but Roby said, "Hell, no."

Gloria went back to the counter and Roby sat in the booth, thinking what could he do to get some money. All he had was his bike and he still owed on that. He had approached the few friends he had and they had all been unable, or unwilling, to let him have the three hundred he needed.

He did not admit to himself that he would be unable to pay the money back. The racing season started in less than two months and he would win big. Yeah. The idea of a job never occurred to him as worthy of serious consideration.

No, it had to be easy money, and it had to be quick, or he would lose his bike. This business with Gloria was getting tense, too. Roby felt cornered, felt like fighting, felt frightened. He clenched his fist around the flimsy ketchup con-

tainer and crumpled it savagely. A red worm of ketchup oozed out, coiling through his whitened fingers.

That night they went parking in Gloria's old Ford. As long as she was pregnant anyway...

NEXT DAY ROBY stopped by the Texaco station for a road map and sat on his Harley studying it. He studied it for about fifteen minutes. Then he folded it and shoved it in his jeans pocket, gunned the Harley a couple of times, loudly, and wheeled into the road.

He did the fifteen miles to Ennis Corners in thirteen minutes along a narrow, winding two-lane highway. He wheeled the bike into an alley, parked it and left his jacket with it. He put dark glasses on and went into a drug store on a side street. No one knew him in Ennis Corners.

Speaking in a high, squeaky voice, with what he thought was a Spic-sounding accent, Roby bought the biggest and most realistic-looking cap pistol they carried. He bought a box of caps ("for the kid to shoot in it") and the clerk insisted on showing him how to put them in the gun. Roby thanked him in his squeaky Spic voice and left with the toy gun in a paper sack.

On the way back to town, Roby turned off the road when he was still a couple of miles away and bumped down a dirt road a

hundred yards into the woods. He turned off his engine. Bushes and scrubby second-growth pines surrounded a little clearing.

This was where Gloria had parked with him the night before. Other people parked here too, and some came here to dump worthless furniture and other trash. The rutted ground was littered with beer cans and bottles. On a bush at eye level, swaying gently in the light breeze, hung a woman's torn panty-hose.

Roby hunted through the trash for half an hour, turning over piles of rubbish, old box springs, discarded car parts. He found a big baggy pair of soiled green work pants and a torn brown jacket. He rolled these into a ball under his arm and kept looking. He could not find a hat that he liked.

Finally, under a rusty clothes washer, he found a green cap with the bill torn off. He tried it on and it was too big. All the clothes stank. He rolled them up in a piece of newspaper and rode on into town with them and the toy gun in his saddle bags.

Frankie found him at noon as Roby was walking out of the Zodiac. Frankie put his big soft hand on Roby's shoulder and immobilized him. His bulk loomed over Roby like a tractor-trailer about to wipe him off the road.

"Roby Tucker!" said Frankie cheerfully. His voice was high and juvenile. He smiled vacuously. "I

been lookin' for you."

"Hi, Frankie," said Roby nervously. He tried to shake off Frankie's paw.

"Joe Rainey wants the hunnert you owe him, Roby," said Frankie in a concerned voice. He still smiled down at Roby. His eyes wandered from side to side looking up and down the street for cops.

Thoughts fumbled through Roby's head. He couldn't tell anyone he was going to get money soon or they might get suspicious of how. Besides, if he didn't get enough, Rainey still wouldn't get paid — Gloria had to get taken care of first. Roby wasn't sure how much that would cost.

Last time it had been a hundred but the lady had been picked up since then and didn't know if Gloria would be able to find another one as cheap. And then there was the taxes on the house. He decided he had to keep his mouth shut and try to get away from Frankie and stay away till he had some money he could give to Joe Rainey.

"Yeah, I gotta go see Joe about that," said Roby. He kept smiling to keep Frankie smiling. "You care for a beer, Frankie?"

Frankie thought it over slowly. He wanted a beer but Rainey had told him that if he saw Tucker to bring either the money or Tucker's ass back to the Billiard Academy pronto.

"Uh...well, okay," said Frankie

slowly, "but you better come and see Joe with me right after."

They turned back into the Zodiac.

Roby sat slumped in his chair. Frankie sat across from him, drinking beer from a can and eating the cheap, stale, oversalted potato chips the Zodiac put out. Roby had drunk many beers with him and felt fuzzy and full but Frankie was still drinking and eating.

Roby reflected on the amount of beer Frankie could put away in that big gut of his. Frankie was fat but he was big, strong. When they had come through the door into the Zodiac Frankie's hand had been on his shoulder, almost like a cop's. Everyone in the bar had seen it and had looked away immediately, at their buddy or their girl or at the ceiling.

Frankie had taken custody of him and Roby knew that though his shoulder hurt Frankie had not meant to hurt him. Not then. Frankie was just strong. He wasn't really mean, either, he just worked for Rainey.

Roby's bladder hurt. Could he get out the window of the john? He visualized the scruffy interior of the men's john in the Zodiac Lounge and could not remember how big the window was or how it was fastened. Was there an alley out back? He couldn't remember.

He didn't want to go see Rainey. If he couldn't give Rainey the money, at least some of the two

hundred dollars, Rainey would tell Frankie to beat him up, sure. Maybe Rainey would take his cycle and hock it. No, dammit, not his cycle! His mind, spinning up to now in crazy, slow circles, stopped and a drunken coldness seeped into him.

His eyes narrowed and with an effort he focussed his wandering gaze on Frankie's puffy face. A handful of potato chips disappeared into it, followed by half a can of beer. Roby casually put his left forearm up on the table and leaned forward a little, across the table, toward Frankie.

His right hand, concealed by the table, dropped slowly down his leg toward his boot, where his blade was hidden. He wondered if he had the guts to...he could slash him across the forehead suddenly, so that the blood would blind him...no, by God, he should go for the throat and get out fast, but...

His fingers found the knife and he felt the catch against his thumb. He tensed his legs and he saw Frankie's face, his mouth, his throat swallowing, his throat...

Frankie looked directly at him. Roby froze, his eyes dilating in fear. Frankie put his hand on Roby's wrist, squeezed it.

"I gotta take a leak, Roby. I'll be right back. Order a couple more, willya?"

Roby left a fiver on the table and ran out as soon as the door to the john closed. Silly laughter flut-

tered in his throat. He found his Harley and popped an unsteady wheelie as Frankie, remembering too late, burst out of the john with his fly open and stared stupidly around the interior of the Zodiac Lounge.

ROBY TUCKER HAD bought a spray can of black engine primer at the cycle shop. He got Billy Sabro to loan him his key to Miller's Body Shop, where Billy worked. He had told Billy he wanted to do a little tuning up on the Harley. He had done some things for Billy so he trusted Roby and let him have the keys when he wanted.

Roby wheeled his cycle in and locked the door behind him. The shop was dark and silent. When Roby flicked the lights on a radio hummed and then started playing. Roby turned it down and turned all the overhead lights off except the one over the drill press.

He took his toy pistol out of the paper bag. Its size and heft pleased him. He pointed it at a nudie calendar and made bang noises softly with his lips. He turned the pages of the calendar, which he had not seen before, and when he had admired all the nudies clamped the toy gun in the drill press and carefully drilled out the soft metal fillet in the muzzle until the barrel looked deep and deadly.

The removal of the fillet, though, permitted the barrel,

which was cast or stamped in two halves, to gap down its length, so that its falsity was immediately evident. Roby worked, silent and absorbed, soldering the two halves of the barrel together with a gasoline blowtorch, filing the soldered seams until they were flush with the rest of the barrel.

When the metal cooled he inspected the toy closely, especially from the front. He noted the telltale gap where the little spool popped up for the roll of caps and he filled the gap with solder and dressed it to the contours of the frame of the gun. When the toy cooled again he wiped it carefully with a gasoline-soaked rag and used the hose from the air compressor to dry it.

Holding it by a string to the trigger guard he sprayed it with two coats of black engine primer. When it was dry he rubbed the flat black paint with motor oil until it gleamed dully. He put it back in its paper bag, cleaned up the shop, turned out the light and the radio and wheeled his bike out.

He left the keys in Billy's mailbox and, as he rode over the creek, he threw the half-empty spray can into the darkness. He did not hear it splash over the roar of his engine.

He parked outside the diner until Gloria was through with work. When she came out and saw him there he reached back and patted the seat behind him. Gloria looked tired and kind of sore.

"Let's go, baby," he said, smiling at her from astride the bike.

"Don't give me that baby crap," she said viciously, "You no-good bum."

Roby was surprised, shocked. Gloria had never talked to him mean like that before. "Hey, now," he said uncertainly.

"No-good bum," said Gloria. She raised her fists to hit at him and then she seemed to wilt and the viciousness went out of her and she bent her head and covered her face with her hands. Roby stared at her for a moment and then got off the Harley and put his arms around her.

Roby Tucker held Gloria without speaking and people watched from inside the diner. A truck roared by, its wheels whining on the pavement. It was starting to rain.

After a while Gloria stopped sobbing and wiped her eyes and tried to smile up at him.

"Roby," she said, very trusting and gentle, "I love you and I want to have your baby. Can't I have it? I'll keep working at the dinner after it comes. You don't even have to marry me. We can rent a place and just live together. Can't I have it, Roby?"

Roby was looking at her red, tired eyes and he felt her soft shoulders under the worn old jacket. He felt remote, felt like he was watching all this from over his own shoulder, felt like he was

someone or somewhere else.

He wanted to say that she couldn't, that he was a rovin' kind of guy and wasn't the type to stick to no woman long, but as he started to say it all again he realized that he was already speaking, saying "I dunno. Maybe. We'll see," and pressing her head against his chest.

Boxed in, he thought hopelessly. Boxed in. Jesus, he thought, This has got to work.

He dropped her off at her parent's house and watched her go up the walk. She turned and waved to him, smiling unhappily. He waved back. She went inside and the door closed. A moment later the porch light went out and Roby was alone in the dark rainy street.

It's time, he thought. He patted the bundle in his saddlebags and started the Harley. The raindrops glittered in the headlight.

He took the back streets to the eastern part of town, where he hardly ever went. It was ten o'clock and the streets were deserted. Many of the houses were already dark. He parked the Harley in a vacant lot, behind some bushes with some kind of sweet, heavy-smelling flowers.

He unwrapped the newspapers, which were damp and did not crackle, and put on the green work pants and the brown jacket. He pulled them on over his dark jeans and black sweater. He couldn't smell the clothes because of the

heavy-smelling flowers but he remembered how they stank.

He put on sunglasses and the green cap with the bill torn off. He eyed the Harley — yes, it was pointed so that he could roll between the bushes right onto the street. He took the gun from the brown bag and put it in the right-hand pocket of the torn brown jacket.

He had decided not to rob a house because they might have a real gun and might shoot without warning if he made any noise in the dark. If he robbed a store or bar or gas station he could act innocent at first and then pull the gun and make the guy hold his hands up and take the money.

He walked down the dark street to where it intersected Main Street between two buildings. He looked cautiously around as he stood on the corner. The streetlight was far down the block and he stood in a pool of shadows. He saw lights on in a bar, a Sunoco station, and a five-and-dime store.

There were other lights farther down Main Street but they were too far from the side street where his bike was hidden. The bar was out because there would be people in it...if there weren't the bar would be closed by now, he thought.

There was no one at all on the sidewalks besides Roby as far as he could see down the street. It was quite dark and a light breeze was blowing. It felt cool and good.

Roby was too hot in the sweater and the jacket. He heard a plane in the sky far away. He forced himself to relax and think. *Be cool, man, play it cool*, he said to himself.

The gas station's out, he thought. He had worked at a gas station for a few weeks, before he tried the Army, and on Sunday night they had cleaned out the cash register for the week.

I'd be lucky to get fifty bucks there tonight, he thought. *And fifty bucks just won't cut it.*

The five-and-dime was closest to him, too, and on the same side of the street. So it would be the store. He started walking slowly toward it. About a hundred steps. Cool. Easy, take it easy, you just wanna buy some cigarettes, maybe a magazine. He felt that the gun made a bulge in his jacket and put his right hand in his pocket to conceal it.

The toy pistol felt good, felt heavy, real. He knew he had it made when the doorbell jangled behind him and he saw there was no one else in the store. He stopped and turned to the door again. He turned the placard hanging from it over, from OPEN to CLOSED, then walked between the magazine racks toward the counter.

As he did so an old man stepped out of some back room and moved behind the counter. He was tall but bent, with his white hair crew-cut, wearing brown plastic-

rimmed spectacles with one lens of dark glass, and a sports shirt open at the neck.

The old man smiled commercially at the stranger. "Evenin'!" he said.

"Howdy," said Roby. "You got any cigarettes?"

"Sure, what kind you need?" said the old man, turning to the rows marked in florescent light

TOBACCO PRODUCTS.

Roby told him. The old man spun them on the counter and added a book of matches. GET AHEAD IN A FAST-MOVING FIELD, the matches promised. Roby put three quarters on the glass counter, seventy-five cents. He moved closer to the counter to pick up the cigarettes.

The old man pressed a key and the register drawer slid open and Roby saw rows of green bills, piled high. His heart hammered in his ears and his hearing became indistinct. His right hand jerked the gun from its pocket and pointed it.

He said, "Put your hands up," but the words didn't come out right or maybe they did and only sounded strange. The old man apparently didn't hear him. He was frozen with Roby's change in one hand, his eyes fixed on the muzzle of the gun, his mouth sagging slowly open. Then the change clattered on the glass counter and the old man's hands rose quickly above his head.

Roby fumbled out his sack from

his left pocket, popped it open with his left hand, laid it on the counter and gestured with the pistol. The old man kept his eye on the gun, as if by looking at it he could prevent its going off. His hands moved independently of his eyes, scooping bills from the drawers and shoving the stacks into the paper bag. The hands went for the first drawerful of coins, but Roby said loudly.

"No. Just bills."

"That's all I got," whispered the old man.

"Okay," said Roby. "Get in the back room." He motioned with his pistol. The old man walked woodenly into the back room. "Down," said Roby. He pulled clothesline from his pants pockets and tied the old man up. He knelt and held the opened-blade against the old man's neck.

"Feel this, old man?" he asked. The old man jerked his head. "I'm gonna be in the other room, in the store for a while. I hear any noise from you, I come back and make it quiet. Get me?"

The old man jerked his head wildly. Roby stepped over him and closed the door to the back room. He found the light switches and turned the lights out in the store. Everything was going fine and he felt calmer now. He even waited for a few seconds and listened to prove to himself how cool he was. He closed the door to the five-and-dime behind him. The bell sounded very loud.

THERE WAS NO ONE in the street. He walked toward the side street, loose, easy, slow but not too slow. He became conscious of the toy gun still clenched in his hand and started. Not cool. He dropped it back in his pocket.

He came to the corner and looked around.

There was a car parked beside his bike.

Roby shrank back. He recognized the car in the flash he'd had of it. It was a '70 Chevy. Rainey's car. And Frankie would be with him.

Roby looked around, panicky. There was still no sound from down the street. He walked jerkily toward the streetlight. He stopped, looked around once more, and took the money out of the bag. Holding it close to his chest, he counted it.

Sixty-three dollars. He took a deep, shuddering breath, and looked up at the street light. The rain made silver tracers under its tin shade.

Boxed in, he thought. I can't go back. Rainey and Frankie'll beat me up and wreck the bike. He felt the sides of the box pressing his ribs.

A flash of red light flicked across his face and he started and looked down the street. A patrol car had stopped in front of the five-and-dime. Old geezer must've gotten loose, he thought. I should have cut the cord on his

phone, I guess.

A weight fell on his shoulder. He looked up into Frankie's face.

"Hi, Roby. Joe and me — we been lookin' for you."

The hand on Roby's shoulder turned him around and dragged him toward the alley. As they approached the Chevy the door opened. Rainey's pale round face bobbed upward in the semi-darkness:

"Tucker. Can't pay up, huh? Okay, Frankie, go to work."

"No," said Roby.

Frankie, with one hand still on Roby's shoulder, put his foot on the gas tank and shoved the Harley over. The mirrors splintered. The tinkle of glass ringing above the crash of the heavy machine's fall.

"Open up the gas tank," said Rainey, lighting a cigarette.

"No!" said Roby, struggling. He punched uselessly at Frankie's soft bulk.

"Quiet him down," said Rainey.

"Don't, Frankie," said Roby. Frankie's fist came up slow. Frankie grinned.

Roby reached into his pocket.

"Jesus, he's got a gun," said Frankie. He let go. "Hey, Joe, he's —"

Roby held the cap gun out. He waved it to cover the both of them. They watched him, not moving. He started to back away. Then he ran, down the alley.

"You little S.O.B.!" he heard Rainey's shout behind him. "Nobody pulls a gun on Joe Rainey! You're *dead*, Tucker!"

Roby ran hard. He turned a corner into another alley. He ran, ran along the rain-slicked pavement, boots echoing from the backs of darkened houses. He thought as he ran, *Jesus! Now I've done it. Frankie woulda beat me up, burned the bike, but that woulda been it.*

Now Rainey would ... he didn't know what Rainey would do.

Kill him, probably. They'd find him in the woods. Cops wouldn't waste much time over someone like Roby Tucker. *Boxed in*, he thought. He felt the top slide on and the nails being hammered in.

He came to another corner and turned it, running hard. The wet heavy clothes dragged at his legs and arms. He sobbed for breath.

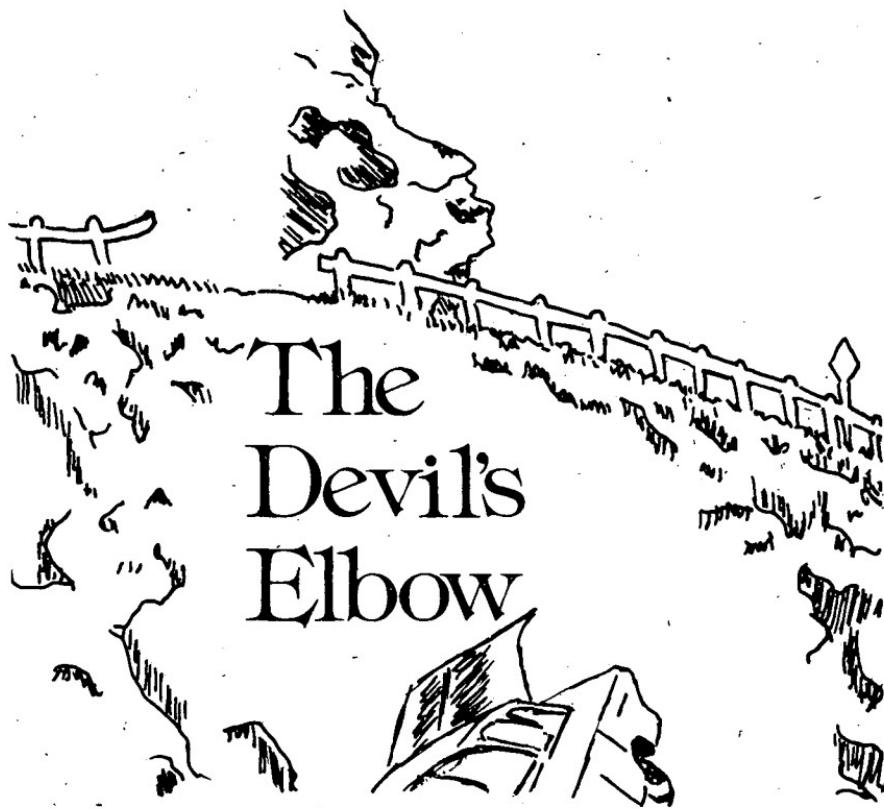
The alley came out on Main Street again, near the five-and-dime. The fat cop looked up surprised as Roby burst into the store.

"*That's him!*" screamed the old man, pointing. The cop tried to draw his gun through his raincoat.

"Take me in, man," panted Roby, holding out his hands for the cuffs.

"What'd you come back here for?" said the cop, snapping them closed, looking into Roby's wild eyes.

"You were my only way out," said Roby Tucker.



by CARL HENRY RATHJEN

When a man is killed instantly, is it curtains? Or are there options out there?

WHEN IT HAPPENED I thought it was an accident.

anger and accusations from my end. But I didn't want to imply there might be cause for a rift, that perhaps I was too old for her.

My mind wasn't on my driving down the cliff-hanger road. At breakfast Robyn and I had fenced with words. It would have been better if there had been open

Robyn had been employed in my publishing company until I decided she would be nicer to

come home to. Just before we married she had seen promise in a manuscript in the slush pile, unsolicited books from unknown writers.

I agreed when I read young Bob becoming our best-selling author, he said I was like a father to him. He had bought a place near us, frequently came to dinner and to consult with us about problems in his current manuscript.

Lately, I had become aware that he was consulting more with Robyn while I was at the office. When I asked him about the new book he vaguely said it was coming along slowly. He changed the subject, asking if I had received any more threats for ousting an unwashed group who tried to establish a commune on part of my property.

He implied he was keeping an eye on Robyn. I told him I wasn't that worried. The group had left the area and Robyn had two guard dogs. He nodded, but he still didn't consult me about his book.

On this particular morning, at breakfast, I asked Robyn about Casey's new manuscript. As I expected, she was vague about it. Maybe I should have voiced my thoughts about her and Casey, but I wasn't sure that situation existed.

So my mind grappled with repressed resentment and jealousy as I drove down the winding road. As I squalled around the Devil's Elbow turn the

right front tire blew. If my mind had been on my driving I might have avoided disaster. My attention snapped back too late for safety maneuvering.

The car tore through the rail and turned lazily end over end as it plunged. I glimpsed a ghostly fishing boat out in the morning mist...oily-looking swells rolling in...then I was looking down at breakers...rocks...the precipice as the car somersaulted...glass splintering...the safety harness holding me futilely as the top bashed in upon me...then nothing...until...

Strangely, I seemed to be up on the precipice or hovering in mid-air while I watched people hauling a bloody mess that looked like me out of the car. It was me. I recognized the tie I'd put on that morning, the one Robyn had given me for my birthday nearly a year ago. I recognized my face, like looking in a mirror, except for the blood and the closed eyes. Someone turned to face up the slope right at me, but apparently didn't see me..

"Call an ambulance," he shouted to the road above.

"It's no use," said a man leaning over my body. "I can't get a pulse. He's not breathing, either. He's gone."

"I'm a nurse," cried a woman. "Get out of my way."

I watched from above as she sharply struck my chest, then began a rhythmical pumping. A

man bent over me, pinched my nostrils, pulled my jaw down, and placed his mouth over mine to blow breath into my lungs.

I may have shaken my head up there, watching them work over the shell of what had been me. After the suspicions I had formed at breakfast, I didn't want to be revived, didn't want to live.

I drifted away from the scene. Slowly, then faster and faster until I was whisking through a black tunnel with small brightly colored lights. Then, in the distance, there appeared a bright white light, like the end of the tunnel. When I arrived there it was dazzling, a quietude, a sense of deep peace, an impression of music somewhere...

Then, as though a hand had been raised before me, I and everything about me seemed to pause. I heard no words, but I knew what they would have been if they'd been spoken.

Something like, "Not yet. You cannot leave now."

I tried to ignore them. I saw a gate and knew if I could gain that and pass through...but it was like trying to wade upstream against a strong current. I must have given up briefly, for suddenly I was viewing the scene below Devil's Elbow again.

People working over my body... bystanders saying it was no use... the nurse continuing with the CPR and admonishing the man who was about to stop the mouth-to-

mouth resuscitation...someone shouting a warning that the car was on fire and might explode.

Then I saw Casey. He was arriving on the scene. He paused by the group working over my body. Then he went to examine the right front tire. He didn't seem aware that I moved in close, right beside him, and leaned in front of him to look at that tire. It was then I knew there had been no accident.

At Devil's Elbow I had been nudged into death. That tire had a bullet hole in it. I had been murdered!

I turned face to face with Casey. He recoiled, but not because of me. It was the explosion of the gasoline tank at the other end of the car.

Helplessly, hovering above the scene, I watched that tire, the evidence of my murder, burn up. It was then I knew the meaning of the words I had sensed.

"Not yet. You cannot leave now."

Unseen, I went through the crowd and re-entered my body.

"He's breathing on his own," someone cried.

And then another voice. "He's got a pulse beat."

The pain came then. I opened my eyes briefly. I saw the faces above me, particularly Casey's. Then with the pain there was a deep hurt and...

I passed out, became unconscious, not like before. What

followed was a kaleidoscope... nurses, male and female, tubes, electrodes on my chest, portable X-ray equipment, Robyn's tear-steaked face, food trays, bedpans. The pain was easing off, but the intense hurt remained, churning, clashing within me.

Finally, a time of clarity. Robyn spent hours beside me, holding my hand, kissing my cheek, rearranging my pillow. I wanted to believe she sincerely loved me, that it had been my imagination about her and Casey. But I couldn't let myself believe it until I'd confronted Casey about that bullet hole in the tire.

How did he know it was there? There had been no other car nearby on the road when the tire had blown. No one knew exactly what happened at the Devil's Elbow, and there were only minutes from the time of the crash until the car exploded. I knew that for a fact.

I knew what time I had left home, how long it would have taken me to reach Devil's Elbow. Then, when I'd re-entered my body and opened my eyes briefly, I'd seen the wristwatch of the nurse giving me the CPR. Only three minutes had elapsed since the crash.

And yet Casey, arriving on the scene less than a minute before I decided to live, had gone right to that tire. Perhaps he had some notion of destroying it, but it was done for him by the car fire and explosion.

So how could I accept Robyn's seeming love for me, knowing what I did about Casey?

Then came the day I was allowed visitors other than immediate family.

Casey was the first one in. We studied each other a moment.

"Hi," he said, then grinned and shook his head. "I'm supposed to be a writer, but that's the best I can come up with."

"Sometimes words are inadequate," I said, feeling the grasp of his hand and wondering how it could be possible to express what I had seen and felt.

"I know the inadequacy," he agreed. "Oh, God, when I saw you go off the Devil's Elbow..."

That jolted me, that admission. What else could he have said? He had arrived on the scene quickly, and people had seen him.

"Where were you?" I asked. "I didn't see you on the road."

"I was walking in the hills." His gaze became intent. "Do you know what happened?"

"At the time," I said slowly, "I thought it was just a blowout."

"And?" he prompted, then shook his head. "Stupid question. I got the impression you had more to say, but there couldn't be. When I got down the hill, people said you were a goner."

"There is more," I said. "I was gone. Not just unconscious. I was on my way...beyond."

His voice was very subdued.

"I've read about such things. We've discussed them, too, remember? And we saw a movie about it together." He hesitated. "If there's more you want to say, I'll listen. But if it's like the writings and the movie, doesn't it have some verifiable, distinctive detail..."

"You'll call it hallucination, imagination." He didn't answer, just waited. I spoke in a very calm voice. "I saw you, Casey. You glanced at me, the people working over me. Then you went to my wrecked car. You went *directly* to the right front tire."

He just stared at me.

"You looked at a bullet hole." I couldn't tell whether that surprised him or he'd been expecting it. "Until then," I said, "I thought I had been the victim of an unfortunate accident, a victim of my own inattentive driving. I was ready to accept my death."

Casey frowned. "Are you telling me, that when you saw me by that tire, that bullet hole, you decided to come back —"

"It wasn't entirely my decision, Casey," I said quietly.

"But you came back, on your own part of it, because of me."

"Don't try to plot a story," I smiled. "The evidence of that bullet hole was gone, burned."

He looked puzzled.

"You know now it wasn't an accident, but you're so calm."

"Yes, I am, Casey. After the

crash, I saw things bigger than myself. Before the crash, petty jealousy and resentment had let the Devil's Elbow nudge me into disaster, for if I'd been alert at the wheel —"

"What jealousy and resentment?" he asked.

I ignored the question.

"When something else urged me to return, and I gave in after seeing you..." I paused, seeking words. "Casey, after what I'd seen out there...I mean out beyond...I couldn't come back with hate in my heart."

For the first time he looked startled.

"Good Lord, you didn't think that I..." He turned suddenly toward the door. I thought he was fleeing. "Will you come in here?" he called.

A sheriff's deputy, a sergeant, came in. Casey asked me to repeat what I had seen.

When I finished, the sergeant shook his head slowly.

"I've never heard anything like this before. But it fits. Mr. Casey told us he'd been walking in the hills that morning and saw a guy fire a rifle at your car. He looked like someone you'd ousted from your property."

"I'll admit we thought the story might have been a cover-up by Mr. Casey, but later we learned of someone who'd seen a guy getting in a car with a rifle farther down the road."

The deputy shook his head

again. "If we ever do catch up to him, he probably won't have the rifle. How could we prove anything with that tire burned up? And for what you just told me, about seeing things when you were supposedly..."

"Dead," I said.

He nodded. "I don't know how that would hold up in court."

"But maybe, in a much higher court," I began.

"Yeah," the deputy grinned. "No shyster could beat that one on a technicality."

Alone with Casey, I held out my hand.

"I'm glad I came back to help clear you further with the police. And as for my personal reasons..."

"No apologies necessary," said

Casey. "We all have intrusions of wrong impressions, mistaken appearances. We all feel the prodding of the devil's elbow at times."

"I know," I admitted, recalling my unspoken feelings at breakfast with Robyn.

Casey looked at his watch.

"You get some sleep now, because when I come back with Robyn..." He grinned. "That crash loused up the secret plans we were making for today."

"What's today?"

"Your birthday, Old Man. Just the three of us will celebrate it here. We'll postpone the big doings until you come home."

"The three of us will be enough," I said. "I *have* come home."

Money In The Bank

by JACK LEAVITT

Bank manager Frank Neiland told his tellers to take no chances in case of a heist. And when it came, they didn't.

OUTSIDE THE Bay Area National Bank, prospective customers gathered to beat the end-of-the-month check-cashing rush. Inside, the tellers looked hesitant when the wall clock announced a new minute. 9:54 clicked into 9:55, a warning that the staff would soon be prey to thugs, arithmetic errors and aching feet.

"Speak about cages." Evelyn Parton gestured at her work space in Window 3. "I feel like a target." An overweight, nervous woman, she spoke in a loud whisper that the assistant manager, walking nearby, could surely overhear.

At Window 4 stood Laura McRay, young, tall and attractive. Laura's dark hair, hanging freely to her shoulders, left people unprepared for the startling blue of her eyes. "Oh, Evelyn, paydays

always upset you." From the corner of her eye, she saw Frank Neiland, the assistant manager, casually interested in their conversation.

"That crazy man robbed me on a payday. But Mr. Neiland," Evelyn called as the young executive walked away, "didn't I do the right thing?"

Frank smiled. His sun-tanned face showed a tolerant warmth for the senior teller. "You always do the right thing, Evelyn." Head turned slightly aside, he winked at Laura. She blushed.

"I gave the man all my money. Nearly eight thousand dollars. Remember how you chased him in the rain? I was afraid he'd shoot you."

"That's all right, Evelyn." Frank rested a hand on her shoulder. "Assistant managers

are expendable. You're not." He turned to Laura. "Neither of you." Their eyes met in mutual interest.

Laura spoke half-ruefully, half-playfully. "I couldn't chase anybody. Not until I lose some weight." She patted her hips, slim curves that led gracefully to long, shapely legs. "Evelyn and I ought to spend our lunch hours jogging."

"When tents come back in style, I'll sign up as a fashion model." Evelyn tugged at the white, loose-fitting blouse she wore over a billowing gray skirt. "Only, Laura, listen to Mr. Neiland. Don't take chances."

"They're stealing honest people's money. If each of us stood up...."

"No!" Frank ordered. Friendship faded as he spoke. "Bank policy forbids it. We're not advertising free money but we don't want anybody hurt inside the bank."

Submissive but sounding unconvinced, Laura asked, "What about our self-respect? The bank's just avoiding lawsuits."

Frank and Evelyn answered at the same time, their words becoming an incomprehensible jumble. Frank began again. "Look, Laura, the only things we're willing to lose are things we can replace. Laura McRay — and those blue eyes — would be hard to duplicate."

"Thank you." Laura blushed again.

"Besides," Evelyn added, "you'll be as frightened as I was. Why, I almost fainted. You'd probably collapse."

The whirr and buzz of the overhead clock signaled 10:00 a.m. Frank walked to the cluster of desks where he and Mr. Delbert, the bank manager, interviewed would-be borrowers. At the main door, the guard turned his key and stepped aside. "Don't anybody push."

The once-massed customers fanned out in separate streaks but congealed again at the narrow carpeting used to control traffic. In single file, hedged by a rope-and-stanchion enclosure, they jostled each other along the prescribed route. When a person reached the head of the line, he would wait for the first available teller to call, "May I help you?"

The initial rush brought a service station attendant to Evelyn's window, while Laura gave a bright "Good morning" to a frail, retired school teacher. The other tellers were equally busy.

On her narrow countertop, Laura spread out a county pay warrant, a savings account passbook and a deposit slip. "Fine. You signed for cash. ... 80....90...100... Would you like some singles, too?"

"I guess so. They used to be worth something."

Past the teacher's shoulder, near the head of the line, one of

the transient street people eased into Laura's sight. Bearded and sullen, he wore a dark headband, open khaki shirt, torn trousers and leather sandals. A classic hippie. On either side of him, the more conventional customers gave way, maintaining respectability through distance.

"For me?" Laura wondered, calculating the luck of the line. Or, she noticed, perhaps his communal cousin, just entering the bank. Well over six feet tall, the newcomer had sallow features given color only by his stringy brown beard and mustache. His large walking stick was a raggedly trimmed branch, topped by a squirrel tail. The newcomer and his look-alike compatriot brushed fingers in passing and waited in separate worlds for their monthly dole to be cashed.

"That's why taxes are killing us," the teacher said as she followed Laura's scrutiny.

"They're harmless, I'm sure. I just wish that once a month they'd have a soap orgy."

A young housewife replaced the teacher at Laura's window. An instant later the first bearded hippie moved to a vacant spot at Evelyn's station. Both tellers greeted their customers, but the housewife's answer was drowned out by the hippie's, "Lady, save the welcome mat for the Macedonians. All I want from you is money."

The housewife's \$30.00 draw

occupied only part of Laura's attention. Once she saw that the hippie did indeed have a money order, plus identification, she relaxed. Evelyn wouldn't be robbed this trip.

The morning could still go beautifully. In the distance the second hippie gained ground along the line. His walking stick dragged on the carpet, scuffing the nap.

"Where's the guard?" Laura looked around. "Maybe down in the safe deposit vault. Better keep an eye out."

Looking far across the bank, she saw Mr. Delbert, the manager, offer an ashtray to a loan applicant who was framed in smoke. Mr. Delbert seemed oily enough to catch fire himself. To the manager's left, Frank Neland was reading the morning mail. The assistant manager's presence reassured her. Nothing would go wrong today.

A cook from a drive-in hamburger stand replaced the housewife. Laura fumbled in her cash drawer, aware of the oncoming hippie. As the line funneled customers to the free tellers, the hippie might soon be thrusting his open palm into Laura's window. She traded \$20.00 bills for the cook's payroll check and passed on rolls of small change for the diner's luncheon trade.

"The people you have to be nice to," Evelyn muttered. "That hippie with the big stick looks even

dirtier than the one I just got rid of."

"Mmmm." Laura straightened up from her cash drawer. "Don't you worry, Evelyn. I'll bet the new one comes to me. He'll be fine."

A new customer, nondescript, kept Laura from further comment.

Nervously, Evelyn tapped her foot near the alarm button. "No matter how fast you ring it, they can always get out the door," she thought. "Still, as long as they're gone from the bank..."

"Is everything all right, Evelyn? You look pale."

"Why, yes." The plump woman gasped. She tried to gloss over her discomfort. "Thank you, Mr. Neiland. I didn't see you come up."

"When I deliver the mail I'm always quiet." Smiling, Frank Neiland placed a letter on a vacant desk. He walked away, glanced back once to examine Laura's trim figure, and let a mischievous grin flash across his sun-tanned features. Evelyn shook her head; Laura, completing a transaction that engrossed her attention, noticed nothing.

With quick steps, his walking stick tapping on the floor, the bearded hippie left the head of the line and moved towards Laura's cubicle, replacing a blurred customer whose exit was quick but routine. The hippie's filmy gray eyes locked onto Evelyn's face in an endurance test until she blinked.

The sudden question from her own window, "Do you cash traveler's checks?" startled Evelyn. A new customer stood before her with a sheaf of checks at the ready.

"Uh, yes. Of course," she answered, her attention wavering. "In a minute, please." She was reaching for her pen, troubled, when an, "Oh!" sounded indistinctly from Laura's cubicle.

Evelyn strained at the noise. Laura — tall, beautiful Laura, her hands clutched together against her chest — stepped backwards. Stumbling, grimacing, she tried to voice another, "Oh!" So subdued was she that no one but Evelyn could hear her.

"Laura, dear..." Evelyn dodged around a small partition and embraced the younger teller. For a moment they swayed together, awkwardly shuffling, the heavy-set woman supporting her trembling colleague. "Lean on me. You'll be fine."

"Please." Laura pushed away. Though her voice was insistent, she steadied herself against the counter. Stepping back, straightening her blouse, Evelyn stood ready to catch her again. A plump, billowing wall of comfort, Evelyn looked around for additional help.

"Trouble?" Frank Neiland rushed over. Ignoring Evelyn, he stared at Laura. What had been a grin a few moments ago was now an anxious frown. He reached out to touch her.

"The little boy," Laura sobbed. "Mr. Delbert's little boy." She held out an inked note to Frank, then crumpled forward before he could take it. The open cash drawer nearly gashed her forehead.

"Laura!" Evelyn screamed. "Help!" She turned to the alarm button."

"Wait!" Frank shouted. One hand gripped the note, the other cushioned Laura. "They've kidnaped the manager's son. *No alarm or he dies.*"

Evelyn screamed again. "We can't wait. They'll kill the boy. You did it," she pointed at the waiting hippie. "You'll pay for this."

Enraged, the hippie waved his walking stick. The squirrel tail fluttered like a war banner. From his crouching position behind the counter, Frank unexpectedly leaped up. He grabbed the stick from the startled hippie, yanked hard and hurled it away. Boosting himself to the countertop, knees bumping into the glass screen, he grappled with the hippie as the guard, gun drawn, bulled through the crowd.

"No pain, mister, please," the hippie begged. "Oof!" he doubled over when the guard punched him in the crotch.

Frank shoved the hippie, still doubled up, against the counter, his throat pressed to the edge. A hard push would crush his Adam's apple. "Where's the boy?

Damn it!"

"Lemme go," the hippie whimpered.

The noise aroused Laura. Slowly, uncertainly, she opened her eyes. The hippie's head, seemingly disembodied, lay on the counter.

"You're hurt." Laura spoke to him. "Did you try to help me?"

"He's a gangster," Evelyn shouted. "Laura, how are you?"

"But ..." Laura shook her head, appealing for agreement. "This man's no trouble. I didn't even speak to him..."

"Mr. Delbert's son..."

"The man before him. *He* gave me the note... Oh, Lord, the boy!" Laura's hand covered her mouth. "We shouldn't have said anything. The note warned me."

"Someone else?" Frank called. "You mean this creep..." He released the hippie. "What'd the robber look like, Laura? Hurry. There's still a chance."

"Medium height, glasses, a dark suit. Oh, I wish I knew. Ordinary."

"Let's go," Frank yelled. "It's worth a chance. Look for someone running." He sped to the door, followed slow-wittedly by the guard. "Head down Crowell Street. I'll go along Center."

"Be careful," Evelyn called. "They've got guns."

Ten minutes later, Frank returned exhausted. He held out empty hands. "The patrol cars took over. They'll never find any-

one. That poor little boy."

"It's all right, Frank. You did your best. I'll need a full report." Mr. Delbert, the manager was speaking. "But they tricked us. They never touched my son. He's safe at home. He was with his mother all morning."

"How about Laura? Miss McCray?" For a moment, Frank couldn't see her in the crowd of customers, employees and policemen. Mr. Delbert gestured at the loan department, where Frank found her seated at a desk. She seemed edging towards collapse but resisting the inevitable tears. Evelyn Parton hovered nearby, trying to be helpful without knowing how.

"Are you... You've had a nasty time, Laura," Frank stammered. "Can I..."

"I told the police everything I could think of." Laura was despondent. "And, Mr. Neiland, I followed bank policy. I didn't try to stop him. How could I? I was so frightened about the boy."

"Didn't I tell you, Mr. Neiland?" Evelyn's sympathy was displaced by her pleasure at having been right. "She fainted."

In a distressed voice, Laura asked, "Could I look at the mug shots tomorrow? I'd like to go home."

An officer dismissed her with a sympathetic wave. Frank straightened his tie. "I'll drive you."

"You're so kind, Mr. Neiland. Thank you. But, please, no."

Laura shyly touched his sleeve. "It wouldn't be right. I want to lie down and, well, I'd rather have someone stay with me. If you understand..."

Evelyn understood. "We'll take my car," she announced. "You see, I know what I'm talking about."

When Frank objected, Laura shook her head. "She means well, Mr. Neiland. Evelyn and I get along. She won't lecture me before making tea."

At the wheel of her car, driving from the parking lot, Evelyn said, "Frank Neiland's quite a protector."

"He didn't notice you at all."

"I'm too fat," Evelyn laughed. "Everyone's too embarrassed to stare." She tugged at her loose-fitting blouse and skirt. "I ought to diet."

"Be careful. You'll lose the money."

"And ruin a perfect theft?" Evelyn laughed again. "Not a chance. I stitched that false lining too well. When you leaned against me, you slipped the bills in perfectly. They'll remain there until we cut the thread. Safe as money in the bank."

As they waited for a left-hand turn, Laura asked, "I wonder if that hippie'll sue Mr. Neiland."

"Let him. With us as character witnesses, how could Frank Neiland lose?"

Traffic cleared and they hurried home.

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Thirty Days

by THOMAS DWYER

Most people dread going to jail.
The old lady dreaded leaving it.

THEY TOOK HER out to the Women's House of Detention on Riker's Island, next to La Guardia, and she could see the jets taking off and burning blue flames.

The Center stood in the middle of a lawn; its face was tan, and the bricks looked like they had just been enameled, and the two front doors were aluminum steel, and stood open.

There were no walls or fences, but only the East River, which surrounded the Island and came running in at the shore like it was surf. From time to time, inmates of the Men's Prison had

tried to swim for the lights on La Guardia, but the current was swift and freezing and there were whirlpools, and most of the swimmers had come floating back face down.

There were no cells in the Women's Center, but separate rooms without doors, and walls that ran halfway up on one side, and windows with curtains but no bars. The food was good and they had people in white coats to serve it, and she didn't have to set a table or wash a dish.

Her first night she woke wondering where she was, and she got up and stood at the window to see

the airport beacons and the lighted run-ways and the planes coming in out of the night.

The next morning the Chaplain stopped in to see her. He was tall and wore a backwards collar and she asked him to say a prayer, and they knelt on the floor. He had the kind of voice you hear in church and it reminded her of when she was a kid, and it made her feel good.

The department store had little alarms attached to the dresses, and the alarms were so small you wouldn't know they were there, but when you got to the front door they sounded off, and the guard stepped forward.

At lunch in the messhall, she met a girl named Shirley. Shirley was in for cutting her common-law husband.

"We got three kids," explained Shirley. "He was two-timing."

"I've got a bum too," she said. "He's a drunk."

A list of self-improvement classes available to inmates was posted on all bulletin boards. Sewing, cooking, remedial reading, Beauty Parlor training and, for those who wanted to be their own lawyers, a library heavy on Blackstone.

For recreation there was the Game-room mostly cards, checkers, and Monopoly. Twice a week there were movies. Outdoors there was an area for volleyball, or jogging, or sitting on a bench and watching the speed-boats slice

Jamaica Bay. But the main attraction was TV, the game shows and soap operas were big.

Two weeks passed and she was standing at her window when they told her she had a visitor. It was contact visiting. The room was big and there were plenty of chairs placed around and no wire mesh or glass partitions, and you could shake hands, or hold them.

Alicia was sitting in one of the straight-backed chairs, waiting for her.

"You look good," said Alicia.

"It's like a vacation."

"There's plenty of grass out here."

"I've got a curtain on my window," she said.

Alicia had cigarettes. They lit a pair and the smoke moved across the room.

A couple of days later, she had another visitor. She went upstairs to find him standing by the door waiting for her.

"I got a job," he said, "I start tomorrow."

"You'll drink and lose it."

"I'm off the booze."

"Don't fool me again."

"You'll see."

The thirty-days were up. At breakfast she said her good byes. Later in the morning they released her.

She went up the stairs of the tenement and let herself into the apartment. He was lying on the bed and the room smelled of whiskey.

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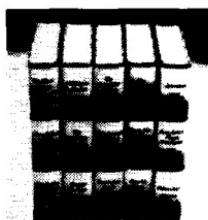
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